

From Darkness to Light

Walking the Narrow Way Through Scripture, Obedience, and
Faith

by Jim Carmichael

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”
— Isaiah 9:2

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Dedication Page

Dedicated to my wife, Jody—
a gift of grace from God,
and a faithful companion on the narrow way.

Without her steadfast love and support, I do not believe I
would have completed this journey.

Also dedicated to the Bond family:
to my grandmother, who took in such a rascal and taught him the
meaning of a life lived rightly—even if it took forty years to take
hold;
to Eugene Bond and his family, who taught me about Jesus in such
a way that His truth never left me.

And to Bill and Ethelene Bond,
who took us in after Grandma Bond passed away, and gave
stability when it was most needed.

Above all,
to my Savior, who used even my failures and brokenness to lead
me to His truth.

“All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.”

This quietly signals seriousness and consistency.

Author's Note

Why This Book Was Written

I want to state clearly, before anything else, why this book exists.

I did not write it to draw attention to myself. In truth, I was deeply reluctant to write it at all. Too many people remember who I was before I returned to Christ, and the temptation to remain silent—to protect my pride—was strong. I recognize that reluctance for what it was: pride. And I rejected it.

I am writing for one reason only: in the hope that someone, somewhere, in their darkest hour, might find light.

Jesus tells us to let our light shine before others—not so that we will be praised, but so that God will be glorified (Matthew 5:16). If there is any light in this story, it does not belong to me. It belongs to God, who was faithful when I was not, patient when I was stubborn, and merciful far beyond anything I deserved.

This book is also a testimony to God's chesed—His covenant mercy—extended to a sinner like me. My life is not a story of moral ascent, but of rescue. I did not find God through brilliance, discipline, or insight. I was found by grace.

There is, however, another reason this book exists—especially in its latter half.

Much of what I learned about faith, Scripture, and discipleship, I learned the hard way: by wrestling, questioning, failing, and returning again and again to the Word of God itself. Over time, I came to realize something both simple and profound: God is not trying to deceive us with hidden meanings or buried truths accessible only to experts or systems.

That realization led me to a deep study of John 15—not to uncover something new, but to test whether the plain message of

Scripture could truly be trusted. What I discovered was not complexity beneath simplicity, but coherence. Scripture remained true, intact, and trustworthy even under the closest scrutiny.

God did not hide His truth behind riddles meant to mislead sincere seekers. He revealed it plainly, consistently, and faithfully. The surface message of Scripture—the message accessible to the humble reader—is not a trap. It is the truth.

That discovery changed everything for me.

It led me to question not Scripture, but the doctrines and traditions that often stand between people and Scripture. Over time, I became convinced that many believers are taught to trust theological systems before trusting the Word of God itself. Well-meaning traditions, creeds, and “isms” too often shape how Scripture is read, rather than allowing Scripture to shape belief.

My hope—my prayer—is that some who read this book will find the courage to do what I eventually did: set aside inherited systems and return to the Word of God with open eyes and an honest heart.

This is not a call to rebellion. It is a call to submission—submission to Scripture rather than to labels. Calvinism. Arminianism. Mormonism. Any system that asks Scripture to conform to it, rather than bowing before Scripture, ultimately obscures the gospel it claims to defend.

What I am urging instead is not another “ism,” but something far older and far simpler: a return to the Bible itself. Not Bible-plus-tradition. Not Bible-filtered-through-systems. Just Scripture—read carefully, humbly, and in its full context.

If, after reading this book, even a few people turn away from human doctrines and return to God’s Word alone—trusting it, obeying it, and living it—then every uncomfortable memory, every

exposed failure, and every surrendered piece of pride will have been worth it.

This book is not about my journey from darkness to light. It is about God's faithfulness to lead anyone—no matter how far gone—into the light of His truth.

And if He did it for me, He can do it for anyone.

Finally, this book may also be used as a book of instruction—not as a system to master, but as a guide for learning how to understand God's Word as it was given.

Scripture is not a collection of disconnected verses. It has structure, intention, and unity. When approached rightly, we begin by understanding how the Bible is constructed, then by grasping its overall message. From there, each book, each grouping of books, each passage, and each verse finds its proper place within the whole.

When Scripture is handled this way, its coherence becomes evident. Meaning flows from the smallest details upward into the grand narrative, and from the grand narrative back down into every word. The message of God is supported from bottom to top—and from the top, back down again.

This book is offered in the hope that readers will not only trust Scripture, but learn how to read it faithfully—without adding to it, taking from it, or forcing it into systems it was never meant to serve.

Who Is Jim Carmichael?

That question turned out to be harder to answer than I expected.

I moved often. I lived in many places. I passed through many seasons. There is no single person who has known me all my life—no lifelong friend who witnessed both my failures and my faith, my darkness and my restoration. Much of my life was lived quietly, and much of it was lived at the margins.

What I know is this: I am a man shaped early by loss, instability, illness, and absence—and preserved, again and again, by a grace I did not earn.

Those early years did not produce in me a hunger for control or certainty. Instead, they formed a steady, if often unspoken, trust: not confidence in myself, but confidence that life—somehow—would hold. I have never been driven by fear of the future or anxiety over provision. I have known scarcity, but I have never known abandonment.

At the same time, I have never been fully comfortable with myself. I examine my motives carefully. I distrust ease—especially spiritual ease. I am far more concerned about deceiving myself than about being exposed by others. That vigilance was forged in years of emotional illness, alcoholism, and failure, and it remains with me not as a burden, but as a safeguard.

Spiritually, I am not drawn to spectacle, mystery, or special status. I do not seek signs, visions, or authority. What I have sought—often clumsily—is alignment: between Scripture and conscience, between belief and obedience, between truth and daily life. When meaning has appeared in my life, it has come not as affirmation, but as correction—calls to urgency, simplicity, and repentance.

My service has taken place at thresholds: hospice rooms, prison cells, hospital bedsides—places where illusions collapse and surface religion fails. I am not a builder of institutions. I am most at home with people who have nothing left to pretend.

If there is any coherence in my life, it lies here: I am not performing theology. I am living it—often imperfectly, always under mercy.

I do not write as an expert, a scholar, or a man who arrived unscathed. I write as someone who was preserved when he should not have been, restored when he did not deserve it, and taught—slowly and painfully—that God is faithful even when we are not.

That is who Jim Carmichael is.

Foreword

This book was not written to persuade skeptics, impress theologians, or win arguments. It was written because truth demands clarity, and Scripture deserves obedience rather than revision.

I did not originally intend to tell my life story. For most of my years, I considered my personal history largely unimportant. What mattered to me was not where I had been, but whether Scripture—when taken seriously and without modification—could be trusted to say what it means and mean what it says.

Over time, however, I came to understand that belief never exists in isolation. What we accept as truth shapes how we live, what we excuse, what we resist, and what we obey. My own life—marked by loss, illness, alcoholism, failure, recovery, and service—became the proving ground where belief was tested rather than theorized.

This book makes no claim to special insight, hidden meaning, or spiritual authority. It does not attempt to improve Scripture, modernize it, or reinterpret it to fit contemporary preferences. Its aim is far simpler—and far more demanding: to examine what happens when a person refuses to add to God's Word or take away from it, even when doing so is uncomfortable, unpopular, or costly.

Along the way, I address doctrines that claim biblical authority while quietly overriding Scripture's plain meaning. I also acknowledge how movements that began with sincere intentions have, at times, been diluted by tradition, pride, or human agenda. These discussions are not included to provoke division, but to bring clarity.

The latter portions of this book move beyond biography and theology into examination—testing whether Scripture's meaning

survives close scrutiny. What I found was not novelty or hidden depth, but confirmation. Scripture held.

If you are looking for a book that reassures you that nothing is required of you, this is not that book. If you are looking for a book that treats faith as a system to be mastered, this is not that book either.

But if you are willing to consider Scripture as complete, authoritative, and binding—and to ask honestly what obedience actually costs—then this book was written for you.

Index

Part 1 The Early Years	1
Chapter 1: The Beginning — A Life Marked Early.....	1
Chapter 2: Strength, Fear, and the World That Formed Me.....	3
Chapter 3: Homeless at Sixteen—Or So It Seemed	6
Part 2 Walking in the World.....	7
Chapter 4: Entering the Valley: Failure of Character	7
Chapter 5 – Marriage, Shame, and the Weight of Consequences.....	14
Chapter 6– Work, Money, Pride, and Providence.....	18
Chapter 7 — Facing Harsh Truths About Motivation and Self	24
Part 3 Returning to the Fold.....	28
Chapter 8 — The Road Home Opens	28
Chapter 9- Searching for Truth Among Churches	31
Chapter 10 — When a System Empties the Gospel	35
Chapter 11 — Restoration: Closer to the Apostolic Pattern ..	37

Chapter 12 — Prepared for the Work Assigned.....	39
Part 4 the in-depth training	41
Chapter 13 — A Deeper Study	41
Chapter 14 — The Cost of Taking Scripture Seriously	44
Part 5 — Basic Christianity: Knowing God Through His Son	46
Chapter 15 — The Bible’s One Unified Message	46
Chapter 16 — How the Bible Works Together	50
Chapter 17 — Reading Scripture the Way Scripture Demands	54
Chapter 18 — Hearing the Word and Responding to It.....	59
Chapter 19 — What It Means to Be a Disciple	64
Chapter 20 — Remaining Faithful on the Narrow Way	68
Chapter 21 — Guarding the Truth in a World of Many Voices	72
Chapter 22 — Examining Ourselves Before God	77
Chapter 23 — A Life Fully Surrendered to Christ.....	81
Chapter 24 — A Final Call to Faithful Obedience	85
Chapter 25 — My Life in Light of These Truths.....	88

Part 1 The Early Years

Chapter 1: The Beginning — A Life Marked Early

I have been asked to write about my life. In many ways, I feel it is the least important part of my story. Yet it is still part of the journey God allowed me to walk—a long and winding path that ultimately led me to one consuming desire: to be a simple servant of our Creator and Savior.

That desire—to be a simple servant—is the most important theme of this book, and we will return to it often. But to understand how it took root, some beginning is necessary.

I was born in Wichita, Kansas, on August 23, 1947, to Carl and Opal Carmichael. My father did not know he had a son until I was six months old—a detail that would later come to feel symbolic of much that followed. At four years old, I was stricken with polio. By the grace of God, I recovered fully, though its effects lingered in ways I would not understand until much later.

One of the most influential figures in my early life was my uncle, a pulpit preacher. To me, he was larger than life—the final authority on nearly everything. I loved him deeply and saw him as a father figure. During my illness, prayer meetings were held on my behalf, and my recovery was rightly attributed to God’s mercy and grace.

When I was six years old, my mother died. I was sleeping beside her the night she passed. I like to believe my presence brought her some comfort in her final moments. It certainly left me with a lasting sense of closeness to her. Ten years later, I would again be alone with a loved one at the moment of death—this time

my grandmother. Loss entered my life early, and it did not come only once.

Those first sixteen years were a mixture of grace and grief, love and loneliness. Even then, I knew Christ Jesus. He was the one I turned to, especially as a lonely child. Life left me with emotional and mental struggles I could not name at the time, but Christ's light—quiet and patient—never disappeared. Over the decades, He would lead me, sometimes by paths I would not have chosen, but always toward life. He has always led me.

Those early years left their mark. Loss, illness, and faith were woven together so tightly that I could not tell where one ended and another began. I did not yet understand how deeply those experiences were shaping my inner world—my fears, my contradictions, my compassion. I only knew that I was becoming someone, even if I did not yet know who that someone would be.

Chapter 2: Strength, Fear, and the World That Formed Me

Polio left me physically weak, but it did not take away my desire to be strong. I wanted to be one of the tough guys—a fighter. And yet fear marked much of my childhood. Some would say fear was inevitable, given the life I lived. Perhaps that is true. All I know is that fear remains one of my strongest memories.

Other children had older brothers and present fathers to protect them. I technically had both, but they were absent when I needed them most. I was the baby—the last child my grandmother would raise—and because I was sickly, I may have been pampered. I saw myself as a crybaby, yet I wore a black motorcycle jacket and tried to look tough. Even then, I was a contradiction—a walking paradox.

When my mother died, the loss was compounded by my father's absence. Later, he accepted money from my grandmother in exchange for signing over guardianship of me and my sister, Linda. At the time, I did not understand what that meant. Now I do.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman, though I lacked the maturity to see it then. At sixty-three years old, unable to work and unable to drive, she took in two wounded children—one of them a six-year-old troublemaker like me. For years, it felt as though Linda and I stood alone against the world, even as we were being quietly held together by her strength.

I was sick often. I battled eczema in an era when treatment was crude at best. I remember oatmeal baths and being dyed purple by medication—an experience that did nothing to help me fit in at school. Polio also left nerve damage that caused lasting physical pain, and whether from polio or not, my speech was affected as well. I butchered words then, and I still do now. One of God's

quieter ironies is that He would later call someone who struggles to speak clearly into preaching.

Hospitals became familiar places. Yet through all of this, something unexpected grew in me: compassion. Despite my own pain, I cared deeply for others—especially the weak and defenseless. I was drawn to protect those who were hurting, even when others were unkind to me.

One of the great gifts of those years was spending several months each year on my uncle's farm. The work was hard, and I did not recognize it at the time, but it was building strength—both physical and spiritual. My love for Christ took root there, nurtured by the example of faithful, hardworking people.

God placed me among the Bond family in Wichita—good, deeply Christian people. I did not choose that environment, but it shaped me all the same.

Looking back, I see another tension forming during those years. I was being raised by people shaped by nineteenth-century values—strict discipline, hard work, respect for authority, and simplicity. Those values gave me resilience and integrity and helped restore my physical strength. But they also left me ill-prepared to relate to a rapidly changing world. I often felt out of place among my peers—not rebellious, just out of step—caught between two worlds that followed different rules.

By the time I reached my teenage years, I carried more than most people could see. Strength and fear lived side by side in me. Though I was still standing, the foundation beneath my life was beginning to shift. The protection I had known would soon be gone, and I would be forced—too early—to learn what it meant to stand on my own.

Chapter 3: Homeless at Sixteen— Or So It Seemed

By the time I turned sixteen, Linda was seventeen, and once again the ground beneath our lives shifted. Grandma Bond died, and with her passing came a question I never expected to face so young: Where would we live now?

For a brief and unsettling moment, it felt as though we were homeless—untethered and uncertain. But before the sun set that day, aunts and uncles reached out, each offering to take us in. We were not abandoned; we were surrounded by love. Still, choosing where we would live for the next several years felt heavy, especially at an age when life already feels fragile.

A few months later, Linda married Jim Burnett and began her own life. I stayed with Uncle Bill and Aunt Ethelene. At the time, I believed the decision was purely practical—I wanted to remain at North High in Wichita, the school I loved. Only later did I understand that something far greater than convenience was at work.

Not long after Linda moved out, my uncle suffered a serious heart attack. Had I been living anywhere else, I would not have been there to help. What I thought was my choice revealed itself as God's provision. I was not only being cared for; I was being placed where I could care for others.

They received my Social Security benefits—as orphans do—and I gave them nearly everything I earned selling shoes, keeping only enough for lunch and bus fare. They never asked for it. They were generous, loving people walking through a crisis, and I was able to help.

At sixteen, I did not fully understand what that meant. Now I do. In a season marked by loss and emotional damage, God gave me dignity through responsibility. I was not just surviving—I was contributing. What could have felt like scarcity became purpose. And in learning how to give, I learned how to stand tall.

Even then, carrying deep emotional wounds, Christ's light never left me. He was already leading me—through pain, through paradox, and toward grace.

Reflection

Looking back now, I see how God's hand was guiding every step. What felt like chaos was often quiet order. What seemed like homelessness became a doorway to purpose. In my weakness, He gave me strength—not only to endure, but to serve. And that service planted a seed for the calling that would come later.

Stability returned, at least on the surface. I had a home, and people who cared for me. But the emotional wounds I carried did not disappear simply because my circumstances improved. They waited quietly. In time, those unhealed places would begin to shape choices that led me deeper into the valley than I ever imagined possible.

Part 2 Walking in the World

Chapter 4: Entering the Valley: Failure of Character

These dark years began with a failure of character.

I joined the Navy at seventeen, shortly after my uncle had recovered enough from his heart attack to return to work and resume what appeared to be a normal life. I did not last long. I washed out fairly early, and that marked the beginning of my walk into darkness—and one of the first serious blows to my self-respect.

After my brief stint in the Navy, I returned to live with my aunt and uncle. Although they were good people, I found them intimidating. By the time I was eighteen—during my second attempt to finish my senior year of high school and nearing nineteen, I decided to move out and go live with my sister and brother-in-law. I did not have the courage to confront my aunt and uncle directly. Instead, I waited until they were gone and moved out without telling them.

In time, I came to see that even this fear carried an unexpected lesson: it forced me to begin facing my fears directly, another example of how God can take a weakness and slowly shape it into something constructive.

I am stepping forward in time for a moment to describe what those years eventually produced.

There was another, more subtle effect of those years that I did not recognize until much later. Alcohol gave me a kind of borrowed courage. When intoxicated, fear loosened its grip, and I spoke and acted more freely. Over time—long before I understood what was happening—I began to find that same courage without the alcohol. What had once been counterfeit slowly gave way to something real.

I do not say this to excuse alcoholism or to suggest it was anything other than destructive. But it became another example of how God can take even a harmful thing and, without endorsing it, redeem what was broken beneath it.

When I later returned to the church, I did not quit drinking through a dramatic decision or a conscious vow. Nor did I set out to clean up my language. Instead, something quieter happened. One day I realized that I had not been drinking, and I had not been speaking the way I once did—and I had no clear memory of when either one stopped. God had removed them without spectacle. I did not notice them leaving me until they were already gone.

There is one more detail that returned to me later—something I still do not fully understand. On separate occasions, two people who knew me well in my early life, and another who knew me as an adult, told me they would not have recognized me if they had passed me on the street. They were not speaking only of temperament or behavior, but of physical appearance as well.

I have no explanation for that, other than the cumulative effect of time, changed habits, and the quiet work of God. Whatever the cause, it felt like part of a larger restoration—an overhaul not only of direction and conduct, but of the life itself.

With that said, I need to step back again into those darker years, because the story was not finished there.

Looking back now—from what feels like the far end of my life toward the beginning—I can see a stretch of years I can only describe as walking through a valley. These were dark years, marked by shame, regret, and deep uncertainty. At the time, I lacked the language to describe what I was experiencing. Now, with distance and understanding, I know that I was struggling with serious emotional and mental illness.

I was an emotional wreck, drifting without direction—or at least without good direction. Even when I believed I was choosing a path, it was never one that led toward healing or stability. I was like a ship without a rudder, moving forward only because the

current carried me, surrounded by darkness and unable to see where I was headed or how to stop.

Somewhere along the way, I turned to alcohol. What began as an escape slowly became a cage. Drinking dulled the pain for a moment, but it never healed it. For years, I could not stop. Night after night, I drank until I could barely stand—sometimes until I was literally crawling out of the bar. I told myself I was coping. In truth, I was unraveling.

Alcohol also fed something darker. I became a violent person—at first when intoxicated, and later even when I was not.

Those years are hard to revisit. I made reckless and dangerous choices. I committed crimes—drunk driving among them—and repeatedly put myself and others at risk. I lived in a cycle of remorse followed by the same destructive behavior. For nearly ten years, this pattern defined my life. Each morning brought regret; each evening promised escape; and nothing ever truly changed.

At the time, I thought this was simply who I was. I did not yet understand how broken I had become or how far I had drifted from the person God intended me to be. What I understand now is this: those years were not just about bad choices. They were about pain left untreated, wounds left unnamed, and a soul slowly losing its bearings.

The valley was deep, and I walked in it for a long time. But even there—though I could not see it then—I was not completely abandoned.

During those years, life did not stand still. I married and became a father. I had a son, Michael, and a stepdaughter, Tony. I used to call them my two little Italians—a lighthearted nickname inspired by their Italian-sounding names. Even in the darkness, there was love. I loved them deeply. That is beyond question. But love alone does not excuse what I became.

I was abusive—not only to them, but to everyone around me. My anger, confusion, and brokenness spilled outward. One memory has followed me for decades: spanking Michael with a belt. At the time, I told myself it was discipline. Later, with clearer eyes and a broken heart, I understood the truth. It was undeserved, far too harsh, and born out of my own pain rather than his wrongdoing.

For years afterward, whenever that memory resurfaced, I would call Michael and apologize—again and again. The guilt never truly left me. Some wounds do not fade quietly; they remain until they are faced honestly.

I carried the weight of abusing those I loved for many years. It shaped how I saw myself and deepened the shame that already haunted me. And yet, even in those heavy memories, there were moments of grace. One small, almost humorous memory still makes me smile. Michael was angry with me for years simply because I named him Michael—our last name being Carmichael. I told him he should be grateful I had not named him after my father, Carl, which would have made him Carl Michael Carmichael. By comparison, Michael Carmichael did not seem so bad after all.

Even in the valley, not everything was darkness. Some good things happened too. And the most important truth—one I can see clearly now—is this: Jesus never left me.

As a small child, I learned about Christ through my Uncle Gene, who helped raise me. The entire Bond family surrounded me with faith, keeping me in a close-knit, deeply Christian environment. That foundation mattered far more than I understood at the time. Even when I ran, even when I lived in ways completely contrary to what I had been taught, that early knowledge of Christ never disappeared. It waited.

Years later, I woke up one morning in Florida after yet another night of drinking. My second marriage was unraveling, and I felt utterly empty. But that morning, something was different. A thought settled into my heart with unusual clarity: It's time to go home. I did not mean a physical place. I meant my relationship with Christ.

I had reached rock bottom—an unstable life, constantly moving, constantly drinking too much. I was miserable and completely lost. And yet, that is not the whole truth. God had left a small light burning—one He would soon turn into a raging fire.

Not long after that, I had a dream that has stayed with me ever since. In the dream, I was a little boy again, about nine years old, inside a massive white skyscraper. Everything was white. I was descending a staircase, level after level, moving deeper underground. Each level felt quieter, heavier, until I reached the very bottom.

There, in a corner, stood an old man—about the age I am now—with white hair and a long white beard. He was shoveling coal into a furnace that seemed to heat the entire building. Suddenly, he stopped, turned, and looked directly at me. Then he said, “Hurry, son... hurry.”

I understood immediately. He was not speaking of speed. He was calling me home—to God, to the Church, to the faith I had wandered from for so long.

I did not return the next day. It still took months. By then, the worst of my drinking had ended nearly ten years earlier, but alcohol still held a grip on me. Even so, God was already moving. He led me back to Wichita, and there—quietly, without spectacle—the first real steps back into the fold began.

The valley had been long.
But the road home had already opened.

Chapter 5 – Marriage, Shame, and the Weight of Consequences

My first marriage was an exercise in embarrassment—one that only deepened my already fragile self-image. I believed I was marrying for love, but in hindsight, pride played a much larger role. I could not bear the thought of rejection, and ironically, rejection became a constant companion throughout the marriage.

It was not that Arlene—my first wife and Michael’s mother—was a bad person. She was not. She was human: capable of kindness and mistakes, wanting a normal life, and unknowingly marrying a half-insane drunk. The failure of our marriage was not rooted in cruelty, but in misalignment.

I came to understand later that it was never a marriage joined by God. It was legal cohabitation—sanctioned by a civil license but lacking spiritual foundation. Only much later did I grasp the true meaning of the warning that no one should put asunder what God has joined together—because not all marriages are joined by God. This one was not.

Such unions rarely fail quietly. They leave damage behind—not only in the man and woman involved, but in the families bound to them.

During that marriage, my already poor self-image deteriorated further, fueled almost entirely by my drinking. I wanted to return to my early faith. I genuinely wanted to attend church with my family and change my life, but I had no idea where to begin. Shame stood in the way. I imagined whispers, judgments, rejection. I did not own dress clothes and assumed that meant I did not belong. I did not yet understand that I was welcome long before I was presentable.

At twenty-five, I reconnected with my father. Looking back now, I can see that reunion as a blessing, though at the time I did not understand how layered that blessing would be.

From the time my mother died until I was about eleven, my father visited Linda and me once or twice a year. He was always moving, traveling the country for reasons never fully explained to us. A few years after our mother's death, he remarried a kind woman named Opal—the same name as our mother. Grandma Bond took great offense at this and never hid her resentment.

Dad tried, in his own limited way, to stay connected. When I was eleven, he visited at Christmas and brought gifts—a motorcycle jacket and a watch. Some memories remain oddly vivid. The last contact we had came on my twelfth birthday, when he mailed me five dollars.

Linda's birthday was two weeks later. She waited for her five dollars. It never came. I remember her hurt more clearly than my own. In hindsight, I think it would have been easier if he had sent nothing at all.

We did not hear from him again until I was twenty-five.

When we reunited, everything felt unreal. Linda and I discovered an entire family we never knew existed—the Carmichaels. We had believed we were alone, the last of our name. Instead, we found a large, welcoming family, mostly Christian, much like the Bond family. They lived in Ayden, North Carolina, and I often wondered how different our lives might have been if we had grown up there. It felt like a road not taken.

As I came to know my father as an adult, I saw him clearly for the first time. He was neither monster nor hero—just a man, like other men, who had made mistakes I could finally understand.

His father died in the Lansing Penitentiary when he was twelve. That loss fractured his childhood. Shortly afterward, his mother returned to Virginia with her younger children. For reasons I never fully learned, my father was not allowed to stay. I have often thought about that moment—a grieving twelve-year-old rejected yet again—and the anger and rebellion that must have followed.

Eventually, my father returned to Wichita by riding across the country on the back of a motorcycle in the early 1920s. Whenever I think about that journey, I see both hardship and symbolism—a boy running toward something familiar, even if it was broken.

Over time, I began to see how wounded lives echo forward. Scripture tells us that the consequences of sin can ripple through generations. In our family, that truth was lived, not theoretical.

My great-grandfather was an alcoholic who inherited a large tract of land near Wichita. It was reportedly sold off acre by acre—an acre for a gallon of whiskey—until nothing remained. I suspect his addiction made him cruel, shaping my grandfather, who ultimately died in prison. That pattern continued. My father's unresolved pain, combined with charm and poor judgment, led him into serious trouble. As a young man, he was imprisoned under the Mann Act.

After that, his life narrowed. He struggled to find stable work and became a gambler, working only when forced by necessity. Later, he joined the carnival circuit, owning small operations—a food stand and a gambling booth. Watching his life unfold taught me a hard truth: unresolved hurt rarely ends with the person who carries it.

During this time, I also began to understand what Scripture means when it says we see “through a glass, dimly.” Life is rarely what it appears to be. Even things we envy can carry hidden

burdens. Beauty, charm, and confidence can become traps just as easily as weaknesses can.

Despite everything, reconnecting with my father and discovering that side of the family was a genuine gift. For the first time, I felt a sense of belonging I did not realize I had been missing. Even within the loving Bond family, Linda and I had always felt slightly out of place. That quiet disconnect fed many of the struggles I carried forward.

My father and I eventually clashed, and I stayed away longer than I should have. Then came the diagnosis—lung cancer that had spread to his brain. There was very little time left. He died when I was twenty-nine years old.

I hated losing him. I hated even more knowing I had stayed away when I could have gone.

By then, my life had begun to change direction.

Around that same period, I was involved in another fight—one of many. Though I believed I acted in self-defense against a much larger man, I pleaded guilty to injury to a person, the lowest level felony. It was eventually removed from my record, but the financial consequences were immediate.

I knew minimum wage would never be enough.

So I went into sales.

And life changed—quickly.

Chapter 6— Work, Money, Pride, and Providence

At twenty-eight, I returned once again to sales—this time with the old Montgomery Ward store in Wichita. That decision proved to be a turning point. For the first time in years, my confidence began to return, reinforced by what would become the largest single sale in that store’s history.

I was selling residential air-conditioning systems through the plumbing department. At that time, home air conditioning was still relatively new. Most houses did not yet have it. My job involved going into people’s homes, studying what they already had, and then designing a way to integrate air conditioning into their existing systems—or, when necessary, selling them a complete heating and cooling unit.

I loved the work. I found it exhilarating.

The sale that changed everything involved a man with a very large home—one that required two of the biggest systems we offered to cool it properly. He was qualified. The design was sound. The installation was straightforward.

Ward’s rejected the sale.

Not because of the customer—but because of the size of the transaction itself. In those days, department stores handled credit decisions internally. There were no national lenders absorbing risk. The credit office saw the numbers, grew afraid, and declined the deal.

Fear ruled the decision.

That moment marked the first time I clearly recognized the sin of fear—not fear as caution, but fear as paralysis. Fear does not simply stop progress; it reshapes decisions, narrows vision, and

quietly determines outcomes. “Fear not” began to mean something more to me—not as a comforting phrase, but as a warning.

Before long, I moved on to automobile sales, and once again my life shifted direction.

Everyday Faith — God at Work in Ordinary Life

My early years in car sales did not begin well. At a Pontiac and Cadillac dealership, I failed to sell a single car in my first ten days. Then something broke loose. I “broke the ice,” and soon I was doing well—never the top salesman, but consistently productive.

I sold used cars, and I loved it. Once, I sold five cars in a single day—four of which were approved and delivered. To put that in perspective, the average salesman sold nine or ten cars in an entire month.

More importantly, sales gave me something I had lacked most of my life: confidence. My self-image improved, and for the first time, I no longer felt as though I didn’t belong—even in church.

At that time, my wife had been raised Catholic, and joining her childhood parish felt like a natural step. I enrolled the children in church school, hopeful that this might mark a genuine return to faith for our family. For a while, it appeared promising. But in time, it became clear that her heart was not truly there. The marriage continued to deteriorate, and when I was thirty years old—thirty days before my thirty-first birthday—we divorced. After I left, the children were taken out of church school, and my own return to faith stalled once again.

Six years earlier, at age twenty-five, I had reconnected with my father for the first time since childhood. A year later, at twenty-six, I met my older brother. Those reconnections filled in missing

pieces of my past, but they did not yet bring stability to my present.

At age twenty-eight, I entered automobile sales. Professionally, things moved quickly. While still in Wichita, I was promoted first to assistant sales manager and then to sales manager. When new ownership took over, they retained me, and from a worldly perspective, I appeared to have a promising future ahead.

After the divorce, I moved to Austin, Texas, where my brother was living. His lifestyle, however, did not align with my desire to return to church, and that part of my life was delayed yet another decade.

In Austin, I worked briefly for a Lincoln dealership and was again promoted quickly. Still, there was one thing I never liked about automobile sales: its instability. Sales was feast or famine, and I grew weary of the uncertainty.

Eventually, I joined AAMCO Transmissions, which at that time had been in business for only about fifteen years. That decision would shape the next forty years of my working life. I remained mostly with AAMCO—occasionally managing independent shops and sometimes returning to car sales—but almost always within the automotive industry.

A Note on Honesty and Public Trust

An important clarification belongs here, because it shaped my understanding of honesty and integrity.

The AAMCO owners I worked with were, for the most part, honest to a fault. That mattered to me. In the early 1980s, however, a prominent Chicago columnist published a harsh exposé portraying AAMCO as fundamentally dishonest. In my experience, that portrayal was unfair.

What received far less attention was what followed. General Motors funded a federal task force to investigate dishonest practices across the automotive repair industry, with special focus on transmission repair. AAMCO was scrutinized closely.

The investigation found that approximately 14 percent of AAMCO's sold work should not have been sold.

That sounds troubling—until placed in context.

Independent transmission shops were found to be dishonest at rates approaching 50 percent. That comparison was largely omitted from public reporting. The narrative had already been written, and the damage was done.

The truth was that customers seeking honest estimates were far safer at AAMCO than at most independent shops of the time. When truth is selectively presented—especially by those claiming to protect the public—the damage can be profound.

I carried that lesson with me.

Lessons That Took Time to Learn

Financially, this was the first season of my life in which I earned what I considered real money. After years spent in minimum-wage work and manual labor, it felt like abundance. On average, my income was three to four times that of the typical worker—a contrast that reshaped my understanding of provision and security.

Along the way, I learned things that are not obvious when you are young.

The first was humility. I came to understand how little wisdom we truly possess. Socrates concluded late in life that what made him wise was knowing he was not wise. Scripture echoes that truth repeatedly: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

I also learned that I did not like being a manager—not because I couldn't do it, but because I disliked ordering people around. That discomfort taught me one of the most important lessons of my life: the power of respect.

When I demanded or pushed, results suffered. When I was harsh, mistakes followed—not because people were incapable, but because resentment destroys focus. But when I treated men with respect, acknowledged their workload, and asked rather than commanded, results followed naturally.

This was not easy for me. I carried shame, anger, and a defensive posture formed early in life. Yet the principle held true—not only in business, but everywhere.

It must also hold true in prison ministry. Rehabilitation cannot begin with humiliation. Inmates have already received more condemnation than they will ever need. Respect is the first step toward restoration.

Another lesson surprised me most of all: the most money I ever made was when I trusted God to provide.

For much of my sales career, I refused salaries or guarantees. I wanted to be paid strictly for what I produced. And I never missed a meal.

I believed I was relying on my own ability. In truth, God was providing.

That experience reshaped my understanding of capitalism. Properly understood, it aligns closely with biblical principles. In the early days of the transmission business, everyone worked on commission—managers and mechanics alike. When business slowed, costs fell. When business prospered, everyone benefited.

When guaranteed wages replaced performance-based compensation, motivation faded. Costs rose. Quality declined. The connection between effort and reward was severed.

There was an old saying: Sales is the easiest low-paying job or the hardest high-paying job.

Over time, I came to see that humility, respect, diligence, and trust in God are not merely practical virtues—they are biblical ones.

When a person follows the commands of Christ, life works—not perfectly, but rightly. Not only in church, but in business, families, and even prisons.

Ironically, my insistence on working purely on commission was rooted in pride. It echoed the sentiment of I did it my way. By refusing a salary, I was silently claiming ownership of my success.

Later, as a prison minister, I learned differently.

I did not demand support, nor did I refuse it. When provision came, I received it as provision—not as proof of worth. Accepting support stripped away the illusion of self-sufficiency and replaced it with dependence and humility.

In that season, I learned something essential: refusing help can be just as prideful as demanding it.

True humility is not saying I need nothing—but recognizing that everything we have is received.

Chapter 7 — Facing Harsh Truths About Motivation and Self

During these years—and in truth, beginning very early in life—I became a pool player. A pool player is a pool player regardless of skill level, much like a salesman is a salesman regardless of how good he is.

What is strange is that I fell in love with the game long before I ever played my first match. As a boy, beginning in my preteens, I watched *The Little Rascals* and *The Bowery Boys* on television. Occasionally, the Bowery Boys would appear in a pool hall, and to me that place looked like a kind of heaven. Long before I understood the game, I was drawn to it.

Over the years, whenever opportunity allowed, I worked at improving my skill. Eventually, after purchasing my own table and practicing moderately but consistently, I reached a level that—for a brief season—I would rate as a ten on a scale of one to ten at a high amateur level. It was not professional-level play, but it was close enough that I was confident I would not miss any makable shot. More importantly, I understood cue-ball control. I could leave the cue ball exactly where I wanted it.

And that is when something unexpected happened.

I became bored.

Once I reached that level of mastery, I stopped practicing seriously. I limited my play to leagues and casual games. In hindsight, that alone taught me something important: skill, once achieved, does not satisfy for long. Mastery without purpose becomes empty.

But pool taught me something deeper than that.

The game mirrors life in a way that is not immediately obvious. Shots do not always produce the outcome we expect. Until you understand principles like gear and ball reaction, you can strike a ball cleanly and still be surprised by the result. Only when you understand the underlying laws does the game begin to make sense.

Life works the same way—and learning God’s Word even more so. We can act with good intentions, make what seem like sound choices, and still be confused by the outcome if we do not understand the principles God has established. Scripture reveals those underlying laws of life. Without them, we are often surprised by consequences we do not expect; with them, the pattern becomes clear.

There are things we do that seem right, that feel right—and yet the result is not what we expected. Scripture says it plainly: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Experience eventually taught me the truth of that verse.

Another lesson came not from the table itself, but from the men gathered around it.

Often, when someone lost to a better player, anger or jealousy surfaced. I was never much of a gambler, but I would occasionally play for beers. Before long, I would often have several beers lined up on my table and get through most of the evening without paying for drinks.

One night in an Oklahoma City bar, I put my money on the table—the customary way of signaling a challenge. I won the first game, and my opponent bought me a beer. When I won the second game and the next man went to buy me a beer, I told him I already had one and suggested he buy my previous opponent a beer instead. When I won again, the next man bought the second man a beer, and so on.

Something remarkable happened.

The competition dissolved. The jealousy vanished. We became friends.

I was not being greedy, nor was I feeding my pride by letting others finance my night. By showing generosity and respect, I removed the tension entirely. In doing so, I learned a living illustration of a command God gives us plainly: love your neighbor as yourself. Treat others as you would want to be treated—with respect, generosity, and courtesy.

The final harsh truth of this chapter came from a different sport altogether.

Growing up in Kansas—where loving basketball is practically a requirement—I loved the game. Yet I never “made the team.” For years, I believed it was because I wasn’t good enough.

Looking back now, I realize that wasn’t true.

I had the ability. What I lacked was the right motivation.

I wasn’t motivated to help the team. I wasn’t motivated to work hard for something larger than myself. I was motivated by pride—by the desire to be seen, admired, respected. In my imagination, I was the great player, and because of that pride, I never worked as hard as I should have.

That same motivation followed me into many other areas of life. I did things for myself—for my ego—rather than for God or for the good of others.

Scripture teaches us to do all things to the glory of God and to work as though we are working for the Lord. Those are the right motivations. They were motivations I simply did not have at the time.

Today, I examine everything I do—even writing this book—to ensure it is not driven by pride, but by a desire to glorify God and, if possible, to lead others to eternal life without them having to make the multitude of mistakes I made before finding my way.

It would be difficult to find someone who made more mistakes—or made them more thoroughly—than I did.

That, too, is a harsh truth.

And it is one worth facing.

Part 3 Returning to the Fold

Chapter 8 — The Road Home Opens

By the time I reached forty, I had learned a great deal—mostly through failure, though not without a measure of success along the way. I could recount the next fifteen years in detail, describing various jobs, experiences, and lessons learned, but doing so would add little to the heart of this story. It would amount to little more than a collection of war stories.

From this point forward, what truly matters is my spiritual growth.

By then, God had already given me early training—enough to know where home truly is. Not a physical place, but a spiritual one: at the center of the church, grounded in faith and obedience. I knew where I belonged, even if I had not yet learned how to remain there.

What began at this stage was a process—one much like advancing through levels of education. Elementary school prepares you for high school; high school prepares you for college; and each new level introduces challenges greater than the last. In the same way, when a person enters—or in my case, reenters—God’s world, when they step onto the narrow path that leads to life, they encounter increasingly demanding challenges.

The first challenge is entering through the narrow gate. That alone is difficult. But once on that path, a second challenge quickly follows: Will you stay on it? It is remarkably easy to drift back into old habits, familiar sins, and comfortable patterns that once defined us.

Corrie ten Boom, the great evangelist who survived the horrors of a World War II concentration camp, offered a powerful illustration of this struggle. In small villages long ago, the priest, pastor, or preacher would ring a large bell on Sunday morning to call the people to worship. When he stopped pulling the rope, the bell did not fall silent at once. It continued to ring—slower and softer—until eventually it came to rest.

Turning from a life of sin to a life led by Christ is much like that bell. Old habits do not stop immediately. For a time, they continue to echo. But as we truly let go—by choice, by discipline, and by submission—those echoes gradually fade until they finally cease.

When I first returned to church, I met with a Presbyterian pastor. During that meeting, as I recommitted my life to Christ, I asked what I believed was a simple and sincere question:

“What do I do now? Should I be rebaptized?”

As a child, I had been baptized at the age of nine. Like many who are baptized young, I later questioned whether I fully understood the meaning and commitment involved. The pastor told me rebaptism was unnecessary. When I pressed further—What do I need to do now?—his answer surprised me.

“Nothing,” he said.

Certain I had misunderstood, I asked again. What do you mean, nothing? He repeated his answer. Still confused, I pressed the matter further.

“Are you saying that if I choose to go back to the bar, drink too much, gamble, or commit other sins, that it doesn’t matter?”

His response stunned me. He said yes—if that was what I wanted to do.

I didn't believe him then. And decades later, I know with certainty that it was not true.

That moment marked the beginning of a deeper struggle—not merely with sin, but with understanding what it truly means to follow Christ. What does it mean to walk the narrow path? What does it mean to remain on it? And what does God actually require of those who claim His name?

Those questions would not leave me. And answering them would take years.

Chapter 9- Searching for Truth Among Churches

Even though I strongly disagreed with the pastor of the Presbyterian church I attended at the time, I remained there faithfully for several years. I listened carefully to his teaching, participated in group Bible studies led by him, and also took part in individual Bible studies with another member of the congregation.

Despite our theological differences, this season marked an important step in my spiritual journey. During that time, I found myself once again serving a church—this time without pay.

My first experience working for a church had occurred many years earlier, when I was nine years old. I worked as a helper to the church custodian, Ralph Lineback—a great man and a tremendous influence on my life. Ralph and his wife had even discussed adopting my sister Linda and me, though my grandmother ultimately decided not to let us go. At least, that is how I always understood it.

Ralph paid me thirty-five cents an hour, and in 1956, I thought I was getting rich.

Years later, my role in the Presbyterian congregation was simple but meaningful: caring for the church grounds, cutting grass, and helping wherever I could. It felt good to serve again, even as I continued to wrestle internally with serious doctrinal concerns.

After a few years, I accepted a job in Lincoln, Nebraska. I attended a church there exactly once. The service was unlike anything I had ever experienced. There was singing. There was preaching. But there was no prayer—no opening prayer, no closing prayer, no prayer at all.

It was the first time I realized that just because a building calls itself a church does not mean it is one—and just because a person calls themselves a Christian does not mean they are a Christian.

It remains the only worship service I have ever attended where prayer was completely absent. Needless to say, I never returned.

During this period, I began listening to the Bible on cassette tape while driving back and forth between Lincoln and Wichita. I listened constantly, going through the entire Bible several times. I'll admit there were moments when my mind wandered and I had to rewind and listen again—but I kept listening.

I also began listening to a radio preacher. It didn't take long to realize he was teaching a doctrine I could not reconcile with Scripture—determinism. Over time, I came to understand how powerful presuppositions can be. Many who believe determinism do so because they were raised in it—taught from childhood by parents and congregations who presented it as unquestionable truth.

However, I'm getting ahead of myself.

What became clear to me was this: no matter our background, each of us is responsible for learning the truth for ourselves.

That realization marked a turning point. I wanted to know who was teaching truth in a world filled with countless interpretations of Scripture. So I made a decision: I would read through the entire Bible and study one to three commentaries alongside it.

Beginning in Genesis, I chose commentaries from three perspectives—Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant. I found the Hebrew perspective especially insightful. I don't recall much from the Catholic commentary, and unfortunately, the Protestant commentaries I selected often failed to align with what I was plainly reading in Scripture.

That study took seven years to complete.

During that time, I visited churches from nearly every denomination—and non-denomination I could find. One experience remains especially vivid. While living in Tucson, Arizona, I called a Nazarene church simply to ask about visiting their congregation. To my shock, I was essentially uninvited. The person on the phone told me bluntly that I wouldn't be comfortable there.

I remember thinking, What?

That moment reinforced something I was already learning: labels mean very little. Titles mean very little. Calling oneself a Christian does not make one a follower of Christ.

Even now, that realization still shocks me.

But it also forced me to ask deeper questions of myself. Am I on the right path? Am I truly committed to being a disciple of Christ? And how far am I willing to go to be faithful to Him?

Those are not comfortable questions—but they are necessary ones. And they are questions every believer must answer.

Not long after, someone explained to me what they described as the two primary theological frameworks within Christianity: Calvinism (determinism) and Arminianism. Suddenly, many of my struggles began to make sense.

Let me step back for a moment.

Over time, I came to understand that Christianity, broadly speaking, has followed two major trajectories. The first is the Reformation tradition. The second is what is called the Restoration Movement.

Here, a basic truth must be stated plainly: two contradictory doctrines cannot both be true. They may both be wrong, but they cannot both be right.

And if either—or both—depart from the original teaching of Christ and His apostles, then they do not lead people toward eternal life with Him, but away from it—toward eternal separation from God, whatever that ultimately entails.

Chapter 10 — When a System Empties the Gospel

At some point, every serious student of Scripture must face a difficult truth: while there are many theological labels, there are only two fundamental directions. Doctrines that make contradictory claims cannot both be right. They may both be wrong, but they cannot both be true. And when the subject is salvation, this is not an academic distinction—it is a matter of eternal consequence.

One of the doctrines I was forced to examine closely was theological determinism, often summarized by the acronym TULIP. At its core, determinism teaches that every human destiny is fixed before birth. Election is unconditional, grace is irresistible, Christ's atonement is limited to a predetermined group, and perseverance is guaranteed regardless of response.

That means the final outcome of every human life is settled prior to hearing, believing, repenting, or obeying.

This is not an accidental side effect of determinism—it is its unavoidable conclusion.

The problem is not merely philosophical. It is biblical.

Scripture teaches that grace comes through faith, faith comes by hearing, hearing comes through the word of God, and the word is brought by preaching. If eternal destiny is fixed before any of that occurs, then faith is emptied of meaning, hearing becomes irrelevant, and preaching is reduced to ceremony rather than participation. Paul's entire argument in Romans 10 collapses.

Determinism also collides with the plain teaching of Scripture regarding human response. Salvation is repeatedly presented as involving belief, repentance, confession, obedience, and

perseverance. Determinism must either redefine these words or reduce them to evidence rather than response. Either way, the text is overridden by the system.

Grace itself is altered. Biblical grace can be resisted, received in vain, or fallen from. It is relational, not mechanical. Grace imposed irresistibly is no longer grace received—it is grace applied by decree.

Even the cross is diminished. If eternal destiny is fixed apart from response, Christ's work becomes confirmatory rather than redemptive. Scripture, however, says Christ died for all, tasted death for everyone, and draws all. Determinism must restrict or reinterpret each of those claims.

Finally, determinism renders Satan strangely irrelevant. Scripture presents him as an active deceiver whose efforts matter because real outcomes are at stake. If outcomes are already fixed, warnings become rhetorical devices rather than genuine cautions.

What troubled me most was this: deterministic theology may use biblical language, but it empties that language of biblical meaning. This may not be its verbal claim, but it is the claim made by its structure and logic.

That realization forced me to keep searching.

Chapter 11 — Restoration: Closer to the Apostolic Pattern

In contrast, I came to see that what is often called the Restoration Movement began with a fundamentally different question—not How do we explain Scripture through a system? but What did the apostles actually teach and practice?

Its original intent was not to form another denomination, but to restore New Testament Christianity as revealed in Scripture. Its foundational commitments were simple and biblical: Scripture as the sole authority, apostolic teaching as the standard, unity among believers without denominational labels, and a faith that responds in obedience.

This approach aligns closely with the New Testament witness—Acts 2, Romans 10, James 2, and repeated warnings against departing from what was “once delivered.”

Unlike the Reformation, which sought to correct an existing institutional church, the Restoration impulse sought to return to the original pattern itself.

That does not mean it has always succeeded.

Over time, the movement was diluted. Principles hardened into unwritten creeds. Methods were elevated to doctrine. Unity gave way to fragmentation. Personal and institutional agendas replaced humility and self-examination. In doing so, some adherents violated the very principle they claimed to uphold: Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.

Yet the failure of those who carried the movement does not invalidate the soundness of its original aim.

The Restoration approach is strongest when it remains self-correcting, Scripture-driven, and centered on Christ rather than identity. It is weakest when it becomes what it once opposed.

I was not claiming perfection. I was claiming proximity—to Scripture, to apostolic teaching, and to the lived faith of the early church.

Chapter 12 — Prepared for the Work Assigned

As I moved into the later years of my life, I found myself looking backward with new clarity. The path God had allowed me to walk—often painfully—had prepared me for what came next. Everything fit.

That preparation made it possible for Jody and me—my true wife, the one God gave me—to serve together as hospice chaplains, ministering to those with little time left. Later, it prepared me to serve as a prison minister, without judgment. I understood by then that I was no better than the men I served—just as broken, just as dependent on grace.

For reasons I still find slightly amusing, my personality fit surprisingly well among prisoners. I laugh about that—though I’m not always sure what it says about me.

God also gave me Jody. In giving her, He gave me three beautiful daughters and many grandchildren. He gave me a family—my assigned children.

We met online, against my expectations. I had no intention of remarrying. Yet something compelled me to sign up, and I made my commitment to Christ unmistakably clear. Over a thousand women viewed my profile. Only six responded.

One of them was Jody.

In truth, I responded to her first. She was “cute.” As it turned out, her daughter had created the profile, and the very first day she was online was the day we connected.

Later, after listening patiently to my long and frustrating search for a church that truly taught Scripture, Jody made a simple

suggestion:

“Why don’t you try a local Church of Christ?”

After more than fifteen years of searching, I was stunned.

They actually taught from the Bible.

They actually used Scripture—without agenda.

Then came another shock: some called them a cult.

A church devoted to Scripture labeled a cult.

To me, that was simply another evidence of how far deception can go.

When a congregation is attacked—not for misconduct or corruption, but simply for teaching Scripture as it is written, with a plain reading and a straightforward call to obedience—I find that revealing. When opposition arises not from the Word itself, but from those motivated to defend doctrines built upon it, that opposition often serves as evidence that the teaching has struck close to the truth. Jesus Himself warned that faithfulness would bring opposition, not applause: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

And that discovery marked the next level of my spiritual growth.

Part 4 the in-depth training

Chapter 13 — A Deeper Study

A Personal Inquiry into Meaning and Coherence

In 2006, I undertook a study of John 15 in a way I had never attempted before. What follows is not a claim of hidden knowledge or special revelation, but an honest inquiry into the coherence and resilience of Scripture.

I did not begin this study because I doubted God, nor because I questioned the identity of Christ. I have always believed in God, and I have always believed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. My purpose was different. I wanted to know whether Scripture, when examined at its most granular level, would unravel under close scrutiny—or whether its meaning would endure.

I chose John 15 because it speaks directly to relationship, purpose, and abiding in Christ. I began with the Greek text, acknowledging openly that even what we call “original” manuscripts come to us through a careful and complex process of transmission. From there, I worked backward conceptually, translating each Greek word into its closest Hebrew equivalent—not to replace the Greek, but to explore the underlying semantic framework that carries meaning.

Next, I took each Hebrew word and broke it down into its individual letters, drawing from the traditional meanings associated with those letters in Jewish thought. From those letter-level meanings, I reconstructed each word’s sense in English, step by step, allowing meaning to emerge from the smallest components upward.

This was not quick or casual work. I devoted approximately four hours a day to this process, and it took a year and a half to complete.

When I finished, I compared the reconstructed meaning with the New King James Version—the translation I personally find to be the most accurate and faithful. What I found surprised me. The meaning I arrived at through this painstaking process aligned precisely with the plain reading of the text. Not loosely. Not merely thematically. But in substance and intent—word for word.

I did not discover a hidden message.

I did not uncover secret doctrine.

I did not arrive at anything new.

Instead, I found confirmation.

What struck me most was that meaning did not degrade as I moved to smaller units of analysis. In most human texts, meaning dissolves when examined too closely. Individual letters carry little significance on their own, and words depend heavily on context to function. Yet in this case, meaning remained coherent—even as it was broken down and then rebuilt.

That experience taught me something important: Scripture does not rely on fragility. Its meaning is constrained from the top down, not invented from the bottom up. Each verse fits within its chapter, each chapter within its book, and each book within the unified narrative of Scripture as a whole.

This study did not give me faith—I already had that. But it did strengthen my understanding, and it gave me deeper confidence in my ability to defend what I believe with gentleness and respect, as instructed in 1 Peter 3:15.

In hindsight, I believe a similar analysis could be performed using numerical values, since Hebrew letters also carry numeric

significance. However, I am cautious with such approaches. Numerical pattern-seeking can easily be forced or misused. Meaning-based coherence, by contrast, is far more resistant to manipulation. The fact that meaning endured under this level of scrutiny was sufficient for me.

In the end, this was not an exercise in mysticism, but in testing resilience.

Scripture did not collapse under examination. It held.

And that, to me, was answer enough.

Chapter 14 — The Cost of Taking Scripture Seriously

The Most Important Lesson

The greatest lesson I learned from this study is simple, but demanding:
we can trust the message delivered through faithful translations of Scripture to be true.

But more than that—we must accept it as truth.
We must accept it as complete.
We must accept it as the perfect communication from God.

And if we are determined to be true disciples of Christ, that commitment carries a cost.

We must put on blinders.
We must reject the doctrines of men and their imposed interpretations.
We must give ourselves fully to the teaching of Scripture—with every ounce of strength, every hour of the day.

We must be willing to be rejected by mainstream churches.
We must be willing to be called false teachers—or even cultists—not because we seek controversy, but because we refuse to abandon the simple message of Scripture.

Faithfulness has never been popular.
It has only ever been costly.

Scripture does not bend to cultural pressure, institutional comfort, or theological fashion. It calls us to conform our lives to its teaching—not to reshape its teaching to fit our lives.

The question before us, then, is no longer What does Scripture teach?

That question has been answered.

The question that remains is far more demanding:

How are we going to live it?

That is where we turn next.

Part 5 — Basic Christianity: Knowing God Through His Son

Chapter 15 — The Bible’s One Unified Message

Basic Christianity begins with a simple but often overlooked truth: we cannot know God rightly apart from knowing His Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot know Christ rightly unless we understand the story Scripture is telling. And we cannot understand that story without walking in the footsteps of Christ—a walk that demands obedience to His commands.

The Bible is not a collection of religious thoughts, moral sayings, or disconnected spiritual writings. It is one unified revelation given by one God, revealing one plan, centered on one Savior, and leading toward one eternal kingdom. Though it contains sixty-six books written over many centuries by many authors, it speaks with a single voice and carries a single, coherent message:

God is redeeming and restoring humanity through Jesus Christ for His glory.

To read Scripture faithfully, we must first understand that larger story.

The Grand Storyline of the Bible

From beginning to end, the Bible follows a clear and consistent movement—one that can be summarized in four stages.

Creation.

God creates a good world and establishes His order, purpose, and

relationship with humanity. Humanity is made in His image, designed for fellowship, obedience, and life under His loving rule.

Fall.

Humanity rebels against God, and that rebellion brings sin, death, separation, and corruption into creation. What was created for life becomes subject to decay. Fellowship with God is broken, not because God withdraws, but because humanity turns away.

Redemption.

God does not abandon His creation. Instead, He initiates a saving plan through covenant promises—beginning with Abraham, unfolding through Israel, and ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Redemption is not an afterthought; it is the heart of God’s response to human failure.

Restoration.

Scripture looks forward to a final renewal in which God restores all things. Evil is defeated, righteousness reigns, and God dwells with His people forever. What was lost in the Fall is not merely repaired—it is gloriously restored.

Everything in Scripture fits within this movement. Nothing stands apart from it.

Why God Gave Us Scripture

The Bible was given for specific and necessary purposes.

First, it reveals God Himself—His character, holiness, righteousness, mercy, faithfulness, and will. Scripture does not merely tell us what God has done; it tells us who He is.

Second, it reveals humanity’s condition. We were created for fellowship with God, but we are fallen, unable to save ourselves, and wholly dependent on God’s grace. Scripture strips away every illusion of self-sufficiency.

Third—and most importantly—it reveals Jesus Christ.

Jesus is not a side note in Scripture. He is its center.

He is the fulfillment of prophecy, the climax of redemption, the revelation of God's nature, the foundation of salvation, and the King of the coming kingdom. Every book of the Bible either prepares for Him, reveals Him, or points back to Him. If Christ is removed from Scripture, the Bible loses its coherence.

How the Whole Bible Works Together

The Old Testament lays the foundation.

The Law reveals God's holiness and humanity's need for a Savior. History shows God's covenant faithfulness despite human failure. The poetic and wisdom books express life with God—fear, joy, suffering, longing, and worship. The prophets expose sin, call for repentance, and speak clearly of the coming Messiah and His kingdom.

The Gospels reveal Christ Himself—His incarnation, teaching, perfect obedience, sacrificial death, resurrection, and rightful authority as Savior and King.

The book of Acts shows the risen Christ continuing His work through Spirit-empowered believers as the gospel spreads outward into the world.

The Epistles explain what Christ has accomplished and how His people are to live in response—addressing salvation, sanctification, righteousness, church life, endurance, and hope.

Revelation brings the story to its rightful conclusion. Christ returns. Evil is judged. Creation is renewed. God dwells with His people forever.

This is not a fragmented collection of writings. It is progressive revelation, moving steadily toward completion. Why This Matters

If Scripture is one unified message, then it must be read as one.

No verse can be understood properly apart from its chapter.
No chapter can be understood apart from its book.
No book can be understood apart from the whole testimony of Scripture.

When Scripture is divided, isolated, or forced into theological systems that override its message, its meaning is distorted. But when it is read as it was given—whole, coherent, and Christ-centered—it speaks with clarity and authority.

At the center of everything Scripture reveals stands one truth: God's glory displayed through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Salvation is by God's grace, received through faith, based on covenant promises fulfilled in Him. God's kingdom is the beginning, middle, and end of the biblical story.

The Bible is not merely informing us. It is calling us.

It calls us to know God as He has revealed Himself, to trust Christ as He truly is, and to submit our lives to the message God has spoken—not the one we wish He had spoken.

This is the foundation of Basic Christianity.

And from here, we move forward—not to invent doctrine, but to learn how to read, interpret, and live what God has already said.

Chapter 16 — How the Bible Works Together

If the Bible truly carries one unified message, then the next question is unavoidable: how does such a large and diverse collection of writings function together as a single revelation?

The answer is not accidental organization or later theological stitching. Scripture works together because it was given progressively, intentionally, and purposefully. God did not reveal everything at once. Instead, He unfolded His plan across time, allowing each part of Scripture to build upon what came before it and prepare for what would follow.

Understanding this progression is essential. Without it, readers are tempted to isolate verses, elevate favorite books, or force Scripture into systems that were never intended. When Scripture is read as it was given, however, its unity becomes unmistakable.

The Old Testament: Laying the Foundation

The Old Testament does not exist to provide moral lessons detached from Christ. It establishes the problem that only Christ can solve.

The Law reveals God's holiness and humanity's inability to meet His standard. It shows us not merely what God requires, but why grace is necessary. The commandments expose sin, not because God delights in restriction, but because truth must precede redemption.

The historical books show God's covenant faithfulness played out in real lives and real nations. Israel repeatedly fails, yet God remains faithful. Kings rise and fall. Judges deliver and disappoint. The lesson is consistent: no human leader, no political system, and no religious structure can bring lasting salvation.

The wisdom and poetic books give voice to the human experience under God's rule. They speak honestly about joy, suffering, fear, doubt, worship, love, and longing. They do not offer shallow optimism. They teach us how to live before God in a broken world while waiting for something more.

The prophets confront sin directly. They call God's people to repentance, warn of judgment, and speak with increasing clarity about a coming Messiah and a future kingdom. Far from being random or obscure, the prophetic writings sharpen expectation. They prepare the way.

By the time the Old Testament closes, the reader should feel the tension: humanity is broken, the law cannot save, kings cannot redeem, and something—or someone—must come.

The Gospels: Christ Revealed

The Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense. They are theological proclamations.

Here, the promises become flesh. Jesus Christ enters history—not as a theory, not as a myth, but as God incarnate. His life, teaching, obedience, death, and resurrection are not merely events to admire; they are the fulfillment of everything that came before.

Each Gospel emphasizes a different aspect of Christ's identity, yet they speak in harmony. Jesus is revealed as the rightful King, the suffering Servant, the Son of Man, and the Son of God. He does not abolish what came before—He fulfills it.

The Gospels stand at the center of Scripture because Christ stands at the center of God's plan.

Acts: Christ's Work Continues

The book of Acts does not introduce a new mission. It shows Christ continuing His work through His people.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, ordinary men and women proclaim the gospel, form the church, and carry the message of salvation outward—from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts demonstrates that Christianity is not a private faith or cultural artifact; it is a living movement.

What Jesus began to do and teach, He continues to do through His body.

The Epistles: Christ Explained

The Epistles explain what the life, death, and resurrection of Christ mean for those who follow Him.

These letters address salvation, grace, faith, obedience, holiness, endurance, church life, and hope. They do not invent doctrine; they clarify it. They take the gospel proclaimed in Acts and apply it to real congregations facing real challenges.

The Epistles show us that Christianity is not merely a moment of belief—it is a transformed way of life lived in response to what Christ has done.

Revelation: Christ Victorious

Revelation concludes the story—not by introducing fear, but by revealing victory.

Christ reigns. Evil is judged. Death is defeated. Creation is restored. God dwells with His people, and the brokenness introduced in Genesis is finally and fully undone.

Revelation does not stand apart from the rest of Scripture; it completes it. What was promised, prepared, revealed, proclaimed, and explained is now fulfilled.

Why This Matters

When Scripture is read this way, its unity becomes clear.

The Old Testament prepares us for Christ.
The Gospels reveal Christ.
Acts proclaims Christ.
The Epistles explain Christ.
Revelation shows Christ reigning forever.

This progression guards us from distortion. It keeps us from reducing Christianity to law alone, grace without obedience, belief without transformation, or hope without accountability. It reminds us that God's revelation is coherent, purposeful, and complete.

The Bible works together because it was given together—by one God, revealing one plan, centered on one Savior.

And if Scripture works this way, then our reading of it must follow that design.

That leads us to the next question—one that cannot be avoided:

How are we to read and interpret Scripture faithfully, without adding to it or taking away from it?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 17 — Reading Scripture the Way Scripture Demands

Not Adding to the Word, Nor Taking Away from It

If Scripture is one unified revelation, then how we handle it matters profoundly. The Bible itself warns us—repeatedly and unmistakably—that God’s Word is not open to human revision. From the Law to the Prophets to the final words of the New Testament, the command is consistent: do not add to what God has spoken, and do not take anything away from it.

“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it.”

— Deuteronomy 4:2

“Every word of God is pure... Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you.”

— Proverbs 30:5–6

“If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues written in this book; and if anyone takes away... God shall take away his part from the Book of Life.”

— Revelation 22:18–19

These warnings frame the entirety of Scripture. They establish a foundational truth: God alone defines His message. Humanity does not edit, refine, modernize, or improve it. We receive it.

What It Means to Add to the Word

Adding to Scripture rarely happens by inserting new verses or claiming new revelation. It happens far more subtly—and far more dangerously.

We add to God’s Word when we introduce doctrines Scripture does not teach, when we bind requirements God did not bind, or

when we elevate traditions, creeds, or theological systems to the level of authority. We add to Scripture when human explanations override the plain meaning of the text, even while using biblical language.

Jesus confronted this directly when He said:

“You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.”

— Matthew 15:6

Whenever tradition governs interpretation instead of Scripture, something has been added. Whenever a system must reinterpret clear passages to remain intact, authority has quietly shifted—from God to man. Mark 16:16 illustrates this plainly. Jesus states that belief and baptism are connected to salvation. Yet entire systems reduce this command to belief alone, not because Scripture is unclear, but because obedience does not fit their framework.

What It Means to Take Away from the Word

Taking away from Scripture often appears gentler, but it is no less destructive. It happens when people minimize, redefine, or neutralize what God has clearly stated.

We take away from Scripture when obedience is dismissed as unnecessary, when conditions God has placed on covenant promises are ignored, when commands are treated as optional suggestions, or when passages that challenge a preferred theology are silenced.

The apostle Peter warned that some would distort Scripture—not accidentally, but recklessly:

“Untaught and unstable people distort [the Scriptures], as they do the rest, to their own destruction.”

— 2 Peter 3:16

To ignore what God has spoken is as serious as inventing what He has not.

Is Scripture Open to Personal Interpretation?

This is where precision matters.

Scripture does require interpretation—but it does not permit private authority.

Peter is explicit:

“No prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation.”

— 2 Peter 1:20

This does not mean Scripture is inaccessible or mysterious. It means meaning does not originate with the reader. Meaning is carried by the text itself, grounded in the author’s intent, the historical and covenantal context, and the unified message of Scripture as a whole.

No individual has the right to impose an interpretation that contradicts apostolic teaching, the rest of Scripture, or the plain sense of the text.

Interpretation Is Discovered, Not Invented

Interpretation is unavoidable. The question is not whether we interpret, but who governs the interpretation.

Faithful interpretation is:

Discovered, not invented

Constrained, not creative

Accountable, not autonomous

The Bereans were commended not for personal opinions, but for submission to Scripture:

“They searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

— Acts 17:11

They did not ask whether a teaching resonated with them. They asked whether it was true.

The Danger of “Personal Interpretation”

When people say, “That’s just my interpretation,” they often mean that meaning is subjective, truth is negotiable, and Scripture has no final authority.

But Scripture does not allow this posture.

If Scripture can mean anything, then it ultimately means nothing. The unity of the gospel depends on shared submission, not individualized meaning.

How Faithful Interpretation Works

Faithful interpretation asks disciplined, humble questions:

What did this mean to the original audience?

How does this fit within the whole of Scripture?

How is this fulfilled or clarified in Christ?

What response does God require?

This approach does not eliminate humility—it demands it.

The Heart of the Issue: Authority

At its core, this is not an intellectual problem. It is a submission problem.

To add to Scripture is to claim authority God did not give. To take away from Scripture is to reject authority God has exercised.

True discipleship does not say, “Speak, Lord, and I will decide what applies.”

It says, “Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears.”

Conclusion

God’s Word is complete and sufficient. We are forbidden to add to it or subtract from it. Scripture is not subject to personal authority, cultural pressure, or theological convenience.

Faithfulness is not measured by originality, creativity, or sincerity—but by submission.

The question is never, “What does this mean to me?”

The question is always, “What has God said—and will I accept it?”

With that foundation laid, we are now prepared to address the most practical and pressing question of all:

What does obedience to the gospel actually look like?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 18 — Hearing the Word and Responding to It

If Scripture is complete, authoritative, and not subject to human revision, then one unavoidable question remains:

What does God require of us in response to His Word?

The Bible does not present revelation as an end in itself. God does not speak merely to inform, but to call. Scripture consistently assumes that hearing is meant to lead somewhere—that truth, once revealed, demands a response.

This is where many misunderstandings arise, not because Scripture is unclear, but because human systems often separate what God has joined together.

Hearing Is Never the Goal

Scripture never treats hearing as a passive act. To hear God's Word is to be confronted by it.

Paul states this plainly:

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

— Romans 10:17

Hearing is not the destination; it is the beginning. Faith does not materialize apart from hearing, but neither does hearing complete its purpose without faith.

James sharpens the point even further:

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

— James 1:22

To hear without responding is not neutrality—it is self-deception.

Biblical Faith Is Responsive Faith

One of the most damaging errors in modern Christianity is the redefinition of faith as mere mental agreement. Scripture does not support this understanding.

Biblical faith is trust expressed through obedience. It is not perfect performance, but it is genuine movement toward God.

Hebrews defines faith not as abstraction, but action:

“By faith Noah... prepared an ark.”

“By faith Abraham obeyed.”

“By faith Moses refused... chose... endured.”

— Hebrews 11

Faith that does nothing is not biblical faith. It is belief without allegiance.

Grace Does Not Cancel Response—It Makes It Possible

Another widespread error is the idea that grace eliminates the need for obedience. Scripture teaches the opposite.

Grace is not opposed to obedience; it is opposed to earning.

Paul writes:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith... not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

— Ephesians 2:8–9

But he does not stop there:

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

— Ephesians 2:10

Grace saves us from sin, not into passivity. It restores us to purpose.

The Call of the Gospel Is Consistent

From the beginning of the church, the response to the gospel followed a clear and consistent pattern. When people asked what they must do, they were not rebuked for asking. They were answered.

On the day of Pentecost, when the crowd was convicted, they cried out:

“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

— Acts 2:37

Peter did not tell them there was nothing to do. He answered:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized... for the remission of sins.”

— Acts 2:38

Throughout Acts, the same elements appear repeatedly:

Hearing the gospel

Believing the message

Repenting of sin

Confessing Christ

Being baptized into Christ

Continuing faithfully

This is not a formula invented by men. It is the apostolic pattern.

Obedience Is Not Legalism

Obedience becomes legalism only when it is detached from faith, grace, and relationship.

Jesus Himself said:

“If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

— John 14:15

Love does not replace obedience. Love motivates it.

Legalism says, “I obey to earn.”

Faith says, “I obey because I trust.”

Why This Matters

If response is optional, then warnings lose meaning.

Commands become suggestions. Judgment becomes unjust.

Scripture collapses under its own contradictions.

But Scripture does not collapse.

Instead, it consistently presents salvation as a gracious invitation that must be received, not resisted; obeyed, not redefined.

Jesus’ final words before His ascension were not vague:

“He who believes and is baptized will be saved.”

— Mark 16:16

Belief that refuses obedience is not belief as Scripture defines it.

The Narrow Path Revisited

Jesus spoke plainly:

“Enter by the narrow gate... because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life.”

— Matthew 7:13–14

The difficulty is not cruelty. It is clarity.

The narrow path excludes pride, autonomy, and self-rule. It demands surrender. And that surrender begins not with perfection, but with submission.

Conclusion

God has spoken. His Word is complete. It carries authority. It demands interpretation governed by truth—not preference.

And it calls for a response.

Christianity is not merely something to be believed. It is something to be obeyed, lived, and endured.

The gospel does not ask for spectators. It calls for disciples.

The next question, then, is unavoidable:

What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ—not in name, but in life?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 19 — What It Means to Be a Disciple

Christianity was never presented as a one-time decision followed by a lifetime of spiritual independence. From the beginning, Jesus did not call people to merely believe facts about Him—He called them to follow Him.

“Follow Me.”

— Matthew 4:19

That simple command defined everything that followed.

A Disciple Is Not a Spectator

The word disciple means a learner—one who submits to instruction, imitation, and correction. In the first century, a disciple did not simply agree with a teacher’s ideas; he rearranged his life around that teacher.

Jesus made this unmistakably clear:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”

— Luke 9:23

This was not poetic language. It was a declaration of allegiance.

Discipleship Involves Cost

One of the most neglected teachings of Jesus is the cost of discipleship. He never concealed it, softened it, or postponed it.

“So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.”

— Luke 14:33

Jesus did not say discipleship would be convenient. He said it would be costly.

The cost is not always material, but it is always personal. Pride must be surrendered. Autonomy must be relinquished. The right to self-rule must be laid down.

Grace Does Not Lower the Cost—It Enables Us to Pay It

Grace is often misunderstood as permission to remain unchanged. Scripture teaches the opposite.

Grace empowers obedience. It does not replace it.

Paul wrote:

“The grace of God that brings salvation... teaches us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.”

— Titus 2:11–12

Grace does not excuse disobedience; it trains us out of it.

A Disciple Abides in Christ

Jesus described discipleship not as constant striving, but as abiding.

“Abide in Me, and I in you... He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.”

— John 15:4–5

Abiding is relational, not mechanical. It is ongoing trust, dependence, and submission. Fruit is not forced; it is produced.

But fruitlessness is not ignored.

“Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away.”
— John 15:2

Discipleship is living connection—not occasional association.

A Disciple Obeys Christ's Teaching

Jesus tied discipleship directly to obedience:

“If you continue in My word, then you are My disciples indeed.”

— John 8:31

Continuing means remaining, persisting, and not departing when teaching becomes uncomfortable.

A disciple does not negotiate commands. He does not rank them by personal preference. He submits to them.

A Disciple Learns to Die Daily

Discipleship is not about self-improvement; it is about self-denial.

Paul expressed this reality clearly:

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”

— Galatians 2:20

The Christian life is not about adding Christ to self. It is about replacing self with Christ.

A Disciple Perseveres

Discipleship is not measured by beginnings, but by endurance.

Jesus warned:

“But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

— Matthew 24:13

This does not mean sinless perfection. It means faithful persistence—returning, repenting, continuing, and trusting.

The Christian walk is not a sprint. It is a narrow road that must be walked daily.

Why This Matters

If discipleship is optional, then Christianity becomes an identity without allegiance. Belief becomes a label, not a life.

But Jesus did not say, “Go and make believers.”
He said:

“Go therefore and make disciples...”
— Matthew 28:19

Discipleship is the goal of the gospel.

Conclusion

A disciple is one who hears Christ, trusts Him, obeys Him, follows Him, and remains with Him.

Not perfectly. But faithfully.

Not proudly. But humbly.

Not by self-effort. But by grace.

Christianity is not about asking Jesus into our lives.
It is about surrendering our lives to Him.

The next question, then, is unavoidable:

How does a disciple remain faithful in a world that constantly pulls in the opposite direction?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 20 — Remaining Faithful on the Narrow Way

Jesus never promised that following Him would make life easier. What He promised was life itself. Between those two truths lies the reality every disciple must face: remaining faithful in a world that constantly pulls in the opposite direction.

Discipleship does not end at the gate. In many ways, that is where it truly begins.

The Narrow Way Is Daily

Jesus described the way that leads to life as narrow—not only at its entrance, but along its entire length.

“Enter by the narrow gate... because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life.”

— Matthew 7:13–14

The narrow way is not a momentary decision; it is a daily walk. It demands attention, intention, and persistence. Drift is easy. Faithfulness is not.

Why Perseverance Matters

Scripture repeatedly warns that beginning well is not enough.

Jesus said:

“But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

— Matthew 24:13

Endurance does not mean never stumbling. It means refusing to quit. It means returning when we fall, repenting when we fail, and continuing when obedience becomes costly.

Salvation is not described as something merely possessed, but something lived toward.

The Reality of Temptation

Temptation is not evidence of weak faith. It is evidence of being alive in a fallen world.

Even Jesus was tempted.

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

— Hebrews 4:15

Temptation itself is not sin. Yielding to it is.

The danger comes when temptation is treated casually—when vigilance is replaced with confidence, and humility gives way to presumption.

The Danger of Drifting

Scripture warns more often about drifting than about sudden rebellion.

“Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.”

— Hebrews 2:1

Drift is subtle. It rarely announces itself. It happens when prayer becomes sporadic, when Scripture is neglected, when obedience is postponed, and when small compromises are excused.

No one wakes up intending to abandon Christ. They drift there.

Grace in the Struggle

God does not abandon His people at the first sign of weakness. Scripture is clear that mercy remains available.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

— 1 John 1:9

Confession is not a failure of faith; it is an expression of it.

But grace is not permission to remain unchanged. It is provision for restoration.

Paul warned against treating grace lightly:

“Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!”

— Romans 6:1–2

Grace lifts us back onto the path—it does not pave an alternate route.

The Role of Discipline

Discipline is one of God’s most misunderstood gifts.

“For whom the Lord loves He chastens.”

— Hebrews 12:6

Discipline is not punishment meant to destroy, but correction meant to preserve. It is evidence of belonging, not rejection.

A disciple learns to receive correction not with resentment, but with gratitude.

Community and Accountability

God never designed discipleship to be lived in isolation.

“Exhort one another daily... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

— Hebrews 3:13

Isolation weakens discernment. Accountability strengthens endurance.

Faithful companions help us see what we cannot see in ourselves.

Fixing Our Eyes Forward

Perseverance is sustained not by fear, but by hope.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us:

“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”
— Hebrews 12:2

Disciples remain faithful not by staring at their failures, but by fixing their eyes on Christ—His faithfulness, His promises, His victory.

Conclusion

Remaining faithful is not about willpower. It is about allegiance.

The narrow way is difficult—but it leads to life. And every step taken in faith, even when imperfect, moves us closer to the One who walks with us.

Christian perseverance is not stubbornness. It is trust sustained over time.

The question that follows is not whether faith can endure hardship—but whether faith can endure truth.

That brings us to the next critical issue:

How do we guard ourselves against false teaching and spiritual deception while remaining faithful to Christ?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 21 — Guarding the Truth in a World of Many Voices

Jesus warned His disciples that danger would not come only from persecution, but from deception. False teaching would not always announce itself as false. Often, it would sound familiar, spiritual, and convincing.

“Take heed that no one deceives you.”

— Matthew 24:4

That warning was not given to unbelievers. It was given to disciples.

False Teaching Is Not a New Problem

From the earliest days of the church, false teaching accompanied the spread of the gospel. Wherever truth went, distortion followed.

Paul warned the Ephesian elders:

“After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”

— Acts 20:29

Notice the danger did not come from outside alone—it came from within. Error often arises among hints of truth, clothed in familiar language.

Why False Teaching Is So Dangerous

False teaching rarely denies Christ outright. Instead, it redefines Him, reshapes His message, or rearranges His commands.

Paul wrote:

“But I fear, lest somehow... your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”

— 2 Corinthians 11:3

The danger is not complexity—it is distortion. When simplicity is replaced with systems, speculation, or human philosophy, truth becomes obscured.

Not All Sincerity Is Truth

One of the most difficult realities to accept is that sincerity does not equal accuracy.

Scripture warns:

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

— Proverbs 14:12

People can be deeply committed, emotionally moved, and passionately devoted—and still be wrong.

Truth is not measured by intention. It is measured by alignment with God’s Word.

The Test of Teaching

Scripture gives us clear standards for discernment.

John instructs:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God.”

— 1 John 4:1

Testing is not cynicism. It is obedience.

Teaching must be tested by:

The full counsel of Scripture

The words of Christ

Apostolic teaching

Consistency with the gospel message

Any doctrine that requires Scripture to be redefined, softened, or ignored has already failed the test.

The Danger of Selective Scripture

False teaching often thrives on partial truth.

Satan himself quoted Scripture—but selectively.

When verses are removed from context, isolated from the whole, or elevated above the rest of Scripture, distortion follows.

Paul warned Timothy:

“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine... they will turn their ears away from the truth.”

— 2 Timothy 4:3–4

Truth requires endurance. Error offers comfort.

Why Discernment Requires Humility

Ironically, pride is one of the greatest obstacles to discernment. Those who believe they cannot be deceived already are.

Paul cautioned,

“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”

(1 Corinthians 10:12)

This is why we must be careful to know—and to abide by—the Word alone. It is our only safe haven from deception.

True discernment does not grow out of superiority, but out of humility. It requires a willingness to be corrected by Scripture, even when that correction is uncomfortable.

The Role of Scripture Saturation

Discernment is not developed overnight. It is cultivated through immersion in God's Word.

The more familiar a person becomes with truth, the easier it is to recognize error.

Jesus prayed:

“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”

— John 17:17

Truth sanctifies. It sharpens spiritual vision.

Faithfulness Over Popularity

False teaching often spreads because it is easier to accept, less demanding, and more culturally acceptable.

Paul reminded the Galatians:

“If I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

— Galatians 1:10

Faithfulness has never been popular. It has always been costly.

Conclusion

The disciple's task is not to invent truth, but to guard it.

Truth is not protected by silence, avoidance, or compromise. It is protected by faithful adherence to Scripture, humble obedience, and courageous clarity.

The world does not suffer from a lack of voices. It suffers from a lack of truth.

The next question is therefore deeply personal:

How do we examine ourselves honestly to ensure we are walking in truth—not merely assuming that we are?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 22 — Examining Ourselves Before God

It is far easier to evaluate doctrines, institutions, and other people than it is to examine ourselves. Yet Scripture repeatedly insists that self-examination is not optional for those who claim to follow Christ.

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”

— 2 Corinthians 13:5

That command is not written to unbelievers. It is written to the church.

Why Self-Examination Matters

One of the most sobering truths in Scripture is that it is possible to be sincerely religious and yet spiritually wrong.

Jesus warned:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven.”

— Matthew 7:21

Those words should arrest us. The people He describes are not hostile to Christ. They speak His name. They claim allegiance. And yet, they are rejected—not because they lacked activity, but because they lacked obedience.

Self-examination is the discipline that prevents false confidence.

The Danger of Assumption

Assumption is one of the enemy’s most effective tools. It convinces us that proximity equals faithfulness, that activity equals obedience, and that familiarity equals truth.

Paul warned the Corinthians:

“Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.”

— 1 Corinthians 10:12

Confidence in self is not faith. It is vulnerability disguised as strength.

Self-Examination Is Not Self-Condensation

Examining ourselves does not mean living in constant guilt or fear. Scripture does not call us to obsess over our failures, but to honestly confront them.

John writes:

“If our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.”

— 1 John 3:20

God is not looking for despair. He is looking for truthfulness.

Self-examination guided by Scripture leads to repentance, not paralysis.

What Scripture Tells Us to Examine

The Bible does not leave us guessing about what matters.

We are called to examine:

Whether we are walking in the light (1 John 1:7)

Whether we are abiding in Christ (John 15:4)

Whether our faith produces obedience (James 2:17)

Whether we love God and others genuinely (1 John 4:20)

Whether we are bearing fruit consistent with repentance
(Matthew 3:8)

These are not abstract qualities. They are lived realities.

The Role of Repentance

Repentance is not a one-time act reserved for conversion. It is a continual posture of discipleship.

Jesus' message was simple and repeated:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

— Matthew 4:17

Repentance means more than regret. It means change—of mind, direction, and allegiance.

A disciple who refuses repentance is not walking forward. He is standing still.

Why Honesty Before God Is Essential

God cannot be deceived. Pretending before Him is futile.

David prayed:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties.”

— Psalm 139:23

That is not the prayer of a man confident in his own righteousness. It is the prayer of a man who wants truth more than comfort.

God corrects those He loves. Refusal to examine ourselves is not humility—it is resistance.

The Role of Scripture in Self-Examination

Scripture acts as a mirror.

“For the word of God is living and powerful... and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

— Hebrews 4:12

We do not measure ourselves by culture, tradition, or comparison to others. We measure ourselves by the Word of God.

Anything else produces either pride or despair—neither of which leads to life.

A Willingness to Be Corrected

One of the clearest marks of spiritual maturity is teachability.

“The wise person loves correction.”

— Proverbs 9:8

Correction is not an attack. It is an invitation to grow.

Those who refuse correction inevitably stop growing—and often stop listening to God altogether.

Conclusion

Self-examination is not about tearing ourselves down. It is about aligning ourselves with truth.

God is not impressed by appearances, titles, or claims. He desires hearts that are honest, humble, and willing to be shaped.

The disciple who examines himself regularly will not be surprised on the day of judgment.

The question that remains is not whether we are willing to look inward—but whether we are willing to change.

That brings us to the final movement of this journey:

What does a faithful life look like when it is fully surrendered to Christ?

That is where we turn next.

Chapter 23 — A Life Fully Surrendered to Christ

Surrender is one of the most misunderstood words in Christianity. To many, it sounds like loss—loss of freedom, loss of identity, loss of control. Scripture presents it very differently. Surrender, in biblical terms, is not the loss of life, but the way life is finally found.

Jesus said it plainly:

“Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

— Matthew 16:25

That statement is not symbolic. It is experiential.

Surrender Is Not Passive

A surrendered life is not a passive life. It is not spiritual resignation or withdrawal from responsibility. It is active obedience directed by trust.

Paul described it this way:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice.”

— Romans 12:1

A living sacrifice is conscious, deliberate, and ongoing. Surrender is not something done once and forgotten. It is something renewed daily.

Surrender Reorders Our Allegiances

A fully surrendered life no longer belongs to self. Christ becomes the center by which everything else is ordered—work, relationships, ambitions, desires, and even suffering.

Jesus made this unavoidable:

“No one can serve two masters.”

— Matthew 6:24

Surrender is the decision to stop negotiating loyalty.

Fruit, Not Performance

A surrendered life is known by its fruit, not by its claims.

Jesus said:

“By their fruits you will know them.”

— Matthew 7:20

Fruit is not self-generated. It is produced by abiding in Christ. Love, patience, humility, endurance, mercy—these are not personality traits. They are spiritual outcomes.

The absence of fruit is not corrected by trying harder, but by returning to the source.

Suffering in a Surrendered Life

Surrender does not exempt a disciple from suffering. Often, it invites it.

Paul wrote:

“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”

— 2 Timothy 3:12

But suffering in a surrendered life is not meaningless. It is formative.

Peter reminds us:

“When you suffer for doing good... this is commendable before God.”

— 1 Peter 2:20

Suffering refines faith, exposes dependence, and strips away illusion. It teaches us where our true hope lies.

Vocation and Ordinary Faithfulness

A surrendered life is not measured by platform or visibility. Most faithfulness is quiet.

Scripture tells us:

“Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.”

— Colossians 3:23

Surrender transforms ordinary work into worship. Faithfulness in daily responsibilities becomes obedience when done for Christ.

God is far more interested in faithfulness than recognition.

Freedom Through Surrender

Paradoxically, surrender brings freedom.

Jesus said:

“If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

— John 8:36

Freedom in Christ is not the freedom to do whatever we want. It is freedom from the tyranny of self, sin, and fear.

The surrendered life is no longer driven by proving worth, protecting image, or securing control. It rests in Christ’s sufficiency.

Hope That Anchors the Soul

A surrendered life is forward-looking.

Paul wrote:

“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

— Philippians 1:21

That is not resignation. That is hope anchored beyond this world.

When Christ is our life, death loses its terror, suffering loses its final word, and faith gains endurance.

Conclusion

A fully surrendered life is not dramatic in appearance, but it is profound in substance.

It is marked by obedience without negotiation, faith without condition, repentance without delay, and hope without illusion.

This is not the life of perfection. It is the life of allegiance.

Christianity does not ask us to add Christ to our lives. It asks us to give our lives to Christ.

The final question remains:

What will we do with what we now know?

That is where this journey must ultimately lead.

Chapter 24 — A Final Call to Faithful Obedience

Every journey reaches a point where explanation must give way to decision. Truth, once revealed, leaves no neutral ground. Scripture never allows us the comfort of admiration without obedience, or belief without allegiance.

Moses stood before Israel and said:

“I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life.”

— Deuteronomy 30:19

Joshua echoed the same call generations later:

“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.”

— Joshua 24:15

And Jesus, standing at the center of history, made the call unmistakably clear:

“Follow Me.”

This book has not been written to win arguments, advance a movement, or refine a system. It has been written to point—again and again—back to Christ, His Word, and the life He calls us to live.

Truth Demands a Response

Truth is not validated by how it makes us feel, nor by how many agree with it. Truth stands on its own authority because it comes from God.

What matters now is not whether these teachings are compelling, but whether they are obeyed.

Jesus said:

“Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I say?”

— Luke 6:46

Those words were not spoken to mock, but to awaken.

The Cost Is Real—and Worth It

Following Christ will cost you something. It may cost you approval. It may cost you comfort. It may cost you relationships, reputation, or security.

But it will never cost you more than refusing Him.

Jesus was honest about this:

“Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”

— Luke 14:27

This is not cruelty. It is clarity.

The cross is not an accessory—it is a surrender.

Faithfulness Over Popularity

The gospel has never needed to be made relevant. It needs to be obeyed.

Throughout history, truth has often been found in the minority. Faithfulness has rarely been celebrated in its own time.

But Scripture assures us:

“Well done, good and faithful servant.”

— Matthew 25:21

That commendation is not given to the clever, the influential, or the admired—but to the faithful.

A Call to Return to Simplicity

Christianity does not need reinvention. It needs restoration.

What Christ established through His apostles is sufficient:

Hear the Word

Believe the truth

Repent of sin

Confess Christ

Be baptized into Him

Walk faithfully

Endure to the end

This is not complicated. It is demanding.

And it is life.

The Question That Remains

At the end of all teaching, all study, all reflection, only one question truly matters:

Will we submit to what God has said?

Not partially. Not selectively. Not temporarily.

But fully.

That question does not belong only to theologians, ministers, or churches. It belongs to every soul who hears the voice of Christ.

And that includes me.

Chapter 25 — My Life in Light of These Truths

It would be dishonest to write all that precedes this chapter without acknowledging the truth about my own life: I did not arrive here by wisdom, discipline, or moral consistency.

I arrived here by mercy.

Everything I have written—about authority, obedience, perseverance, discernment, self-examination, surrender—was not learned in theory. It was learned through failure, pain, repentance, and grace patiently applied over decades.

A Life That Could Have Been Lost

There were many seasons when my life bore little resemblance to the teachings I now hold. I wandered far. I made choices that wounded others and myself. I lived for myself while convincing myself I was surviving.

I was not seeking God.
But God was not finished with me.

Looking back, I can see that even my darkest years were not wasted. They became the ground in which compassion was formed, humility was learned, and judgment was stripped away.

Why I Cannot Judge Others

I have no moral high ground from which to speak. I have stood in places where grace was my only hope.

That is why prison ministry felt natural to me.
That is why hospice ministry felt sacred.

When you have stared honestly at your own brokenness, you recognize it in others—not with contempt, but with understanding.

I was not better than the men I served.
I was simply further along the road of repentance.

Why These Truths Matter to Me

These teachings are not abstractions. They are anchors.

Without the authority of Scripture, I would still be lost.
Without obedience, faith would be a word, not a life.
Without perseverance, I would have quit long ago.
Without self-examination, I would have deceived myself.
Without surrender, I would still belong to myself.

And self was never a good master.

God's Faithfulness in the End

In the later years of my life, God did something I never expected: He gave me peace.

Not because I had earned it—but
Not because I had achieved it
But because I finally stopped resisting Him.

He gave me a wife who walks beside me in faith.
He gave me children and grandchildren who call me family.
He gave me work that mattered—not to the world, but to eternity.

And most of all, He gave me confidence—not in myself, but
in His Word.

If This Book Has One Purpose

If this book accomplishes anything, I pray it does this:

That someone, somewhere, will lay aside tradition, fear, pride,
or hesitation—and simply ask:

“What has God said, and will I follow it?”

Not tomorrow.
Not someday.
Now.

Final Words

I am not writing as a man who has arrived, but as a man who is still walking.

Still listening.
Still repenting.
Still trusting.

And still convinced of this one truth:

God's Word is sufficient.
Christ is worthy.
And the narrow way—though difficult—leads to life.

If you walk it, I will meet you there.

Grace and peace.

A Final Word

Jim Carmichael is a former alcoholic, salesman, hospice chaplain, and prison minister whose life has been shaped by loss, failure, and an unwavering pursuit of biblical truth. Having served those at the margins of life and faith, he writes not as a theologian or institutional leader, but as a watchful disciple committed to Scripture, humility, and obedience. His journey from darkness to light is marked not by spectacle, but by grace—and by a conviction that God’s Word can be trusted in its simplest form.

This is not a book about religion.

It is not a defense of a denomination, a system, or an inherited tradition. It is not an argument for Calvinism, Arminianism, or any other theological “ism.”

From Darkness to Light: Returning to the Word of God is the story of a man who spent much of his life broken, searching, and often wrong—and who eventually discovered that the truth of Scripture does not require systems to explain it, nor traditions to protect it.

Through personal testimony, deep study, and years of service in hospice rooms and prison cells, Jim Carmichael traces a quiet but demanding journey back to the Bible itself—read plainly, humbly, and in context. Along the way, he confronts doctrines that add to Scripture, traditions that subtract from it, and the subtle ways sincerity can drift into deception.

This book is written for those who:

feel uneasy with inherited theology

suspect Scripture has been filtered through systems

long to know Christ without layers of interpretation

believe obedience matters

and are willing to let God's Word speak for itself

At its heart, this book is a call—not to rebellion, but to submission.

Not to novelty, but to faithfulness.

Not to darkness, but to light.

If you are willing to return to the Word of God—without additions, without reductions, and without excuses—this book was written for you.

This book may be freely shared in its complete form. Please do not alter its contents and credit the author.

Written by Jim Carmichael.

Editorial refinement and cover artwork created with the assistance of artificial intelligence.