

God's Arithmetic

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Foreword It is a great privilege for me to recommend this book by Ron Bodlander to you. I have known Ron for about twenty years, and I count him as one of my best friends. I had the wonderful privilege of being his pastor for nine years. Almost every week during that time, Ron would faithfully join me on weekly visitation for the church. No pastor could ever ask for a more faithful and encouraging member to be a part of his flock. Then, when God called us to return to the mission field, Ron became a much treasured prayer partner. Ron has a powerful testimony due to growing up in a Jewish home. He began to read the New Testament in college, and God brought him to faith as he read and began to understand the gospel. He went on to attend seminary so that he might have theological training. He is first and foremost a Biblical theologian. He is also a faithful and committed Bible student and teacher. All that he writes comes from a careful study of the Scriptures. I hope that readers will appreciate the emphasis that he puts on the Word of God. I have had the privilege to read *God's Arithmetic*, chapter by chapter, and I have been impressed by his balanced approach to difficult subjects. All who take the time to read his book will appreciate his Christian maturity and balanced approach. I was asked by Ron to make corrections and suggest any changes or additions to what he had written; however I did not see the need to correct much, and was privileged to add a few things to what Ron has carefully written. It is my prayer that *God's Arithmetic* will be read and even studied by a wide audience. I believe that reading what Ron has written in this book, and then putting it into practice, would help in bringing any believer to a greater level of Christian maturity. Even though I have been in ministry for about forty-five years now, I was challenged by what Ron wrote, and I was encouraged to go on in maturity. God's ways are not our ways; and in contrast to many writers today who try to make His ways like our ways, Ron lets God be God. *God's Arithmetic* is not about easy answers to difficult questions, nor does it encourage casual Christianity. It is about being faithful to what the Bible says, and about being a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, even when it is difficult and costly to do so.

Clifford R. Vick Pastor and Missionary, Pretoria, South Africa August 1, 2012

Introduction In his article on his recent book "Maximum Faith", George Barna writes: "In essence, the born-again community has invited God to reside in our hearts, accepting the special gift of love and

forgiveness that He offered, along with His promise of eternal salvation. Sadly, once we felt certain that we had His gift securely in hand, we abandoned Him and have continued to operate by the standards and values of the world, searching for earthly treasures and pleasures. That is why the research has consistently shown over the past two decades that the lives of born-again Christians are essentially indistinguishable from those of people who do not claim Jesus Christ as their savior. We may be "religious" but we are not truly transformed by our faith in and relationship with God. Only a tiny proportion of born again adults get beyond their profession of faith to experience the more robust and significant life that is available through Christ to His followers."It was early in the year 1974 on a college campus in upstate New York, that I met Jesus Christ. I say *met* rather than merely *accepted*, because to me, Jesus was offering more than a one time special gift of His love and forgiveness. I had encountered the living Savior, who was offering me an opportunity to live life in His presence, and to have my life transformed by His infinite power and intimate care. Immediately, I started to immerse myself in reading the Bible. At first, I had no one to guide me, and there was much I did not understand. One thing was clear to me though: I would never again be the same person I had been before. I began to walk with Jesus, and to follow Him day by day. Any thought of abandoning Him in the way Barna describes, would have made no sense to my newly awakened young mind. Fast forward to 2012. I have come a long way spiritually since those first days after I met Jesus, and I still have a very long way to go; yet one thing has remained the same. . . In the words of the Apostle Paul: "*But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" *Philippians 3:13b-14 NIV* Throughout this journey, I have sought to follow Jesus Christ as His disciple, and to understand His heart and mind. I have discovered that God intends a life for me that is radically different from a life of conformity with our culture and society. If I were to try to explain this life of discipleship to someone who does not believe in Jesus, it would seem quite contrary to many of their commonly accepted views and practices of our modern culture. This is because Jesus Christ has fundamentally changed my life. As a result, my core motivation, and the basic ways that God wants me to live as a citizen of His Kingdom, often stand in stark contrast to the standards and values of the world (as Barna implies they should). However, it is these seeming contradictions toward the world - found in core Christian values - that form the basis of godly character; character that is produced in the life of a person who follows Jesus Christ in true discipleship. It is the heavenly lessons of these basic transformational changes in our motives and attitudes - along with their resultant effects on our character - which has led me to entitle this book: "God's Arithmetic: How Life Adds Up In The Kingdom of God." God's Arithmetic - is the metaphor I have chosen for His design to build into our lives - the qualities that characterize His children as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is God's summation of the kind of transformational living that allows us to add up life from His perspective. God's Arithmetic is the way we must begin to understand all the basic spiritual ideals that He desires to form in our thoughts, actions, and value judgments, while we live as faithful committed disciples of Christ in the world around us. God's Arithmetic is about the heavenly fundamental principles He desires to teach us. It is not about adding, subtracting, multiplying, or dividing numbers; but rather the basic 'math' necessary to successful daily living, as *God's Word* defines success. We experience God's Arithmetic as we begin to see the world through His eyes; to measure our existence as He does; and to allow His Word to shape our reality, instead of trying to forge our own. We become successful in God's eyes, as we take His truth to heart, and initiate the next steps toward ordering our lives in a way that honors Him. This brief journey through the scripture, is not an attempt on my part to give you all of God's Arithmetic. It is not the final word - but only a beginning. There is yet a 'higher math' that lies ahead for us as believers in Christ, on that day when we enter into the fullness of eternal life. But for now, God's challenge for us, is to grow into Kingdom citizens who have come to learn the truth about the kind of people He intends us to be, and how we can take the next few steps on our journey to becoming like Christ. These studies in God's Arithmetic have been divided into eight chapters. The strong chords of divine grace, run through each chapter to tie them all together; yet each one stands on its own, as it highlights a particular equation in God's Arithmetic. Chapter One - **Losing Life To Keep It**; is Jesus' answer to the question of what it really

means to follow Him. What are the choices we embrace when we respond favorably to Jesus' invitation? What does it really mean to reject Jesus' offer to follow Him, and to choose to keep our lives for ourselves - to live our own way? Chapter Two - **No One Wants To Be Last**; is a discussion of the dangers of the wrong kind of 'greatness mentality'. We will look at how Jesus answered the questions, "How do you become a great Christian?", and "What does it mean to be great in the Kingdom of God?" We will examine how Jesus wants us to eliminate self-promotion, arguments, and competition, within the church. We will also consider how walking in Jesus' footsteps of service, leads to a life that is truly blessed. Chapter Three - **Small Is Large One Cup At A Time**; examines the way we regard our service to Christ and His Church. What are the reasons we give to justify our lack of involvement in Christian ministry? Why do we downplay our ability to make a real difference in the Kingdom of God? How does God truly value the least acts of humble service in His name? How can we bring a new energy and joy into even the most modest efforts to aid our fellow believers? We will also look at the pivotal questions, "What is the meaning of success in God's eyes?", and "What is the true meaning and place of spiritual rewards?" Chapter Four - **The Surprising Color of Joy**; looks at the unexpected spiritual blessings that advance in our lives, as we experience God's grace while undergoing trials. What attitude does God desire for us to take toward our hardships and difficulties? How can we learn to see opportunities for spiritual growth - in the surprising ways that God wraps His gifts to us? We will join together on the journey toward mature discipleship, as we learn how the joy of Jesus can permeate our lives in all circumstances. We will discover how God is working to *reinforce* our joy, through every situation we imagine is robbing us of it. Chapter Five - **One For Good Measure**; is an important and meaningful study on the Biblical concept of generosity. What does it mean to be a generous person? What should our motives be as we give? Why should a Christian strive to live with an open hand and an open heart toward others? Is generosity of any benefit to us as believers? What does the spirit of generous giving look like in our lives? Is there any difference between Christian generosity, and the kind of generosity demonstrated by those who do not believe in Christ? We will look at these questions concerning generous giving, and arrive at a new understanding of the Bible's harmony on the matter, from start to finish. We will also learn how God's grace, and not His law, has always been the underlying motivation for Christian stewardship. Chapter Six - **Be Weak To Be Strong**; will demonstrate that there is a clear path that leads us into an experience of spiritual strength and power — a path unimpeded by our many weaknesses and limitations. Through God's Arithmetic, we will explore the amazing idea that God's power is in fact *made perfect* in our weaknesses. How can a Kingdom citizen come to the realization of the power of Christ on display in their life? If there is a path to this power, how do we get started on it? What attitudes must we adopt to allow God's power to work most effectively in our lives? What are the principles that teach us how to find the most satisfying experience of Christ's power and strength striving within us? We will look at some prominent Biblical examples of these principles, and see how they characterize the lives of those who have been used greatly for God's glory. Chapter Seven - **Hi Def Pictures Of God's Children**; struggles with the problem of why so many of Christ's followers are portrayed by the world as hypocrites. Why do we lack the distinctiveness that should mark us as His true disciples? Among all the qualities of character that we strive towards as believers — which ones most effectively identify us as children of God? What godly traits mark us out most clearly as individuals who act like Jesus? If we had to choose only three high definition pictures of Christian character that would best demonstrate our likeness to the Lord — what would they be? We will explore the idea that there *are* three such unique qualities of character; virtues that most effectively allow people to recognize that we are genuine ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Chapter Eight - **When Gain Is Loss**; sets forth from the Bible - humanity's blindness to its true condition: That all people are slaves to sin. Only Jesus Christ can reveal to us our deepest needs, and open our eyes to the truth about how we can obtain a right relationship with God. What makes Jesus unique? What does it mean to know Him? Can this world offer anything that compares with the surpassing value of knowing Him? Why is it important for a follower of Christ to know Him better and better? From the conversion experience of the Apostle Paul, we will explore many commonly asked questions that pertain to our salvation: How many ways are there of obtaining a right relationship with God? Can

anyone acquire God's favor through their own efforts? Are all religions really just the same in God's eyes? How can religion be spiritually dangerous? Are sincere beliefs enough to ensure a person of a place in heaven? Why is the Bible unique? What actions matter when it comes to having peace with God - and what actually has no value at all? What does Paul mean when he says that there is a righteousness that comes from God - and how does he assert we may obtain it? . . . and finally: If salvation is truly so easy for us to receive — why do so many people reject the offer God makes to them? The statistical data from survey takers (like George Barna) may tell us that the lives of most born-again Christians are not that different from others (those who do not claim to know Christ) — but there is no need to believe that this situation is beyond reform. It is with this notion in mind, that God's Arithmetic was written. The intention is to make an appeal to believers in Christ who possess a hunger to grow spiritually. The desire is that these believers will arrive at a deeper, more mature understanding, of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in a world that largely does not. God's Arithmetic is not for the casual disciple. It is for those who are serious about spiritual growth, and who are willing to bring a commitment to it, to think deeply about the meaning of their faith. It is my hope, that the thoughts on these pages will be part of an ongoing legacy of faithful discipleship that I desire to leave with my family, and to all those who have ever known me, or heard me teach the Word of God. It is also my prayer, that this work will honor the many faithful brothers and sisters who have unselfishly given their lives for Christ and the gospel, so that I might have the opportunity to experience the infinite riches of His grace. My ongoing passion, is to be the kind of disciple that Paul exhorted Timothy to be; and to inspire in other believers, that same devotion and desire: *"1 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others."* 2 Timothy 2:1-2 NIV

May God direct this work into the hands and hearts of those it will benefit, and may He use it to bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ, who is God over all, forever praised, Amen. Ron Bodlander Mesa, Arizona. March 2012

Losing Life To Keep It! Is the American dream alive and well? My son doesn't think so. There was a time when people thought that "a chicken in every pot, and a car in every backyard to boot" sounded pretty good. Many Americans have long believed that with a dream, initiative, and a lot of hard work, a person can achieve success no matter their background or place of origin. In today's society there is a new American dream, my son suggests satirically. He thinks the new mantra is, "I want to be able to stay home and do nothing." He is not speaking here of a well-earned retirement after long years of dedicated labor. Rather, the idea is that we dream of having the world handed to us on a silver platter. We aspire to have all the leisure time we desire along with the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want. We crave this position as an entitlement. All we really hunger for is "the good life." "Is that too much to ask?", we say. "Surely, I deserve a life like that." I think my son is correct. I'm not quite certain why this is so. Perhaps it has to do with the false hope state lotteries offer, that we can have it all for only a dollar. Or maybe it is the harsh reality involved for most of us in making ends meet financially, that causes us to pine for easy living. Then again, it could be the sad fact that most Americans do not enjoy their jobs, which in turn causes a longing for a life of ease and comfort. Whatever the true reason for this new American dream, it is grounded in the notion that our ultimate kind of lifestyle would not involve effort or struggle. Certainly, not everyone holds to such a self-indulgent ideal. Most of us realize to some extent, that hard work and perseverance in life contribute to our character, and to our growth as human beings. We are not willing to go so far as to say that our dream is, "to be able to stay home and do nothing." Yet many people still reason that the welfare of their soul would best be served if somehow they could have all the things in the world that their heart desires. "Is there a problem with such wishful thinking?", we might ask. Are such desires really so bad? After all, doesn't God want what is best for us? Doesn't His love for us encompass a desire that we have the best things this world has to offer? Doesn't Jesus want His followers to be happy? If we are poor and unhappy, won't that reflect badly on the gospel? Wouldn't those observing our lives be constrained to say, "Why would I want to be a Christian if it doesn't involve a higher standard of living for me and my family?" My intention here is not to put some kind of premium on poverty. What I want to do is to question the value of a certain kind of thinking. There is a prevailing propensity today toward a kind of

Christianity that supposes we cannot be faithful followers of Christ, if our aim is not the accumulation of material possessions, and the acquisition of the means to live "the good life." The underlying problem with this type of sentiment is that it does not truly reflect the nature of what it really means to follow Jesus Christ. Actually, the burden for the pervasive influence of this kind of thinking lies with the Church. In our zeal to present the incredible offer of the gospel to every person, we often do so in a manner that appeals to the base part of our human nature. We reason that if we told people the true cost of discipleship up front, then the gospel would hold no appeal to them. We falsely assume that if we present the good news about Christ in a way that sounds too much like a challenge, then those who are seeking after God will shy away from our message. This is not to say that we should downplay grace, and the free offer God makes to each of us when He invites us into a personal relationship with Him. For God's great love was clearly evident when He sent the Lord Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world. Through the cross, He offers spiritual healing for the widespread bane of sin and suffering that prevails throughout this fallen evil world in which we live. God has established the New Covenant, through Jesus' death and resurrection. From this Covenant, issue the free flow of forgiveness, the transformation of our hearts, and eternal life. All this is lavished upon us at no cost. That is, there is no cost *to us* in the sense that there is nothing whatsoever we can do to earn our salvation or pay for it - Jesus has paid it all at the cost of his own blood. Yet we do a disservice even to those people who are hurting the most, when we fail to make clear to them, at an appropriate time, the conditions of accepting the gospel and becoming a follower of Jesus. In that sense, there is a "cost" to us. This cost is presented in terms of the context of relationship. In other words, the offer God freely makes us, to believe in His Son, requires a response. If we give people the impression that God wants to share His love with us without a meaningful response required on our part, we are distorting what it means to enter into a personal relationship with Him. The Bible teaches us that the Church is the Bride of Christ. Jesus has taken all of His people collectively and each of us individually, into a very intimate relationship with Himself that the Bible likens unto marriage. In a marriage, it is not possible for the relationship to thrive if one of the partners is solely interested in receiving love from the other but is unwilling to give love themselves. Any such partnership could not be sustained. This is not because the loving partner is unwilling to make the marriage work. It is because the person who is unwilling to respond to that love makes it impossible for the couple to share life together in any meaningful way. The person who gets married is expected to adopt the position of a husband or wife. They are committing to act in a certain way with respect to their new spouse. They are in essence saying that they will love that person for life, and behave in a manner that appropriately reflects the love they are declaring for their partner. By refusing to receive or respond to their spouse's love, the unwilling partner corrupts the nature of their joint participation in the relationship. It makes unattainable the union that was intended when they committed to the marriage in the first place. So then, if we attempt to introduce someone to Jesus Christ, and then fail to help them understand what their response must be for the relationship to be viable, we are inviting them to a life that remains self-centered; a life incapable of spiritual growth. A self-indulgent life is unable to experience the blessings inherent in a relationship with the Creator of the universe. Such a life will fail to develop character, because that person will primarily be seeking only his or her own will and self interests, and not the interests of Jesus Christ. What we really need then, is a way of presenting the free offer of the gospel that does not neglect the demand that is made upon the person who would receive such a generous gift. For although the salvation Jesus offers cannot be earned in any way by what we do, it nonetheless carries with it a condition of acceptance. It may surprise you to learn that it was Jesus Himself who made this clear to everyone, both to those who were seeking a relationship with God, and to those who had already chosen to follow Him. We'll come back to that shortly. As I wrestled with how to introduce Jesus' own invitation to follow Him, I decided to first put forth briefly in my own words, the fitting response to His invitation. This may help us form a healthy Christian perspective, and to better understand the meaning of Jesus' words as they were first spoken to those who sought to follow Him while he was still on earth. When we take Jesus as our Savior, we are also agreeing to own Him as our Lord. The two cannot be separated. As we receive Him into our hearts and are born again, we must

understand that God has now firmly placed us into a new relationship with Himself. The New Testament describes this relationship in various ways. One of these fundamental descriptions is that we are now uniquely God's children in Jesus Christ (John 1:12-13; Rom.8:14-17; Gal.3:26; 4:6-7). As a child of God, we are first and foremost disciples of Jesus with all that that entails. To establish us in this new life, God has given us His Spirit to live and dwell within us. Throughout the variety of ways that the Holy Spirit ministers to us (whether it is to comfort, counsel, guide, encourage, rebuke, teach, exhort, or strengthen), He is always working to transform us into the likeness of Christ (Rom.8:29-30; 2Cor.3:18; 1Jn.3:2). For our new nature to be conformed to the humanity that Jesus exemplifies, there are choices we must make. These choices are incumbent upon us in our new status as children of God. Unquestionably, it is God who empowers us to carry out these choices, but we must agree to them. Our agreement means that we will act upon them. In other words, as God makes clear to us from His Word what it means to follow Christ, we will do so willingly, and in a manner consistent with who He has already declared us to be - His children and His Church - which is the bride of Christ. Here is where God's Arithmetic comes into play. The choices we must make are laid out for us in a way that the carnal mind cannot comprehend. These types of spiritual choices cannot be understood apart from a total willingness to commit ourselves without reservation to Jesus Christ. In God's Arithmetic, as Jesus will present it, one cannot actually follow Him without concurrent choices being made. What then are the choices that must be made when we decide to follow Jesus? To be concise; we give up our old life and exchange it for the new life he brings. This is explained to us effectively in several passages by the Apostle Paul. Look at Romans 6:1-14 MSG: *"So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace — a new life in a new land! That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life — no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us. From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did. That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time — remember, you've been raised from the dead! — into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God."* We see from Paul's illustration that when Jesus died on the cross, He represented all of us. We died there with Him. When God raised Him from the dead, we also were raised with Him. As we undergo Christian baptism, it is a perfect picture of our union with Christ. Because of our identification with Jesus in his death, the power of sin has been broken in our lives. Sin no longer has any control over us. When Jesus rose from death, all those who belong to Him were raised together with Him. The power of the new life that Jesus now has in relationship to God, a life that can never die, has been bestowed upon us as well. Therefore we must consider ourselves as dead to the power of sin in our lives, and as having entered into a brand new relationship with God. The Message (quoted above) paraphrases it this way, "Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word." Since we have now been set free from sin, we are empowered to *choose* to follow after our new nature - which is the regenerated life that God has implanted in us through Jesus Christ. As we just saw, we are not even to give sin a vote as to how we conduct our lives. Rather, we are told to, "Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time — remember, you've been raised from the dead! — into God's way of doing things" (vv.12-14 above). It is important to say at

this point, that this life changing transformation is not some sort of religious fiction. It is a spiritual reality that God has declared to exist when we place our faith in Jesus. We are to regard this new life as real, and then to depend on it's power, as we make the choices that are embraced by the promise of our new relationship with God. Paul relates these same concepts in his other letters as well. In 2 Corinthians 5:15,17 (NLT) he states: "*He (Jesus) died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.*" "*This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*" In Galatians 2:20 NCV, Paul expresses our identification with Christ, and our reception of new life, this way: "*I was put to death on the cross with Christ, and I do not live anymore — it is Christ who lives in me. I still live in my body, but I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself to save me.*" Each of the different ways that Paul expresses these realities, is an echo of Jesus' invitation to follow Him. With that in mind, I want to quote this same verse in Galatians from The Message. This paraphrase highlights the element of choice in following Christ, an element that Paul emphasized: "*Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.*" Each aspect of Paul's commitment to Christ involved choices. It is these choices that sum up for us, what it means to truly follow Christ. What we see here is that Paul's ego has been set aside and his motives have been changed. He has chosen a commitment of faith that is permanently settled in his life. I related earlier how the Bible uses the illustration of marriage to provide us with a picture of the relationship of the Lord Jesus Christ to His Church. When a couple marries, they will typically exchange wedding vows to solemnize and publicly confirm their lifelong commitment to each other. I would like to pull together an explanation of what it means to follow Christ, by putting it in the form of a wedding vow. Although the vow would be taken by the Church collectively as Christ's bride, we realize that what is true for the Church collectively is also true for each of us individually. Here then is what our personal commitment to follow Christ might look like, if we were taking a "wedding vow" to join ourselves to Him for life. *I take you Jesus to be my Savior. I cease immediately and always from all my own efforts to earn God's favor, because you have completely and forever paid the price for my sins when you died on the cross. I rejoice in my place in your family as your child. I welcome my commission as part of your bride, the Church. I understand that this means that my life must always be joined together with your Church in service to you, since we are all one family. Because you rose from the dead and live forever, I understand that I too have received eternal life solely as a free gift of your love and grace. I take joy in this relationship we have entered. I recognize that I am forever reconciled with God and I share in your oneness and peace with Him. I promise to always remember who I am in you — realizing that my daily living will always be a reflection of our bond of love. I take you Jesus my Savior to be forever my Lord. I agree to set aside my ego and to place you on the throne of my life. I commit to leave my old life of sin behind and to walk in the newness of life that is mine in relationship to you. I submit myself fully to the direction of the Holy Spirit, given as your marriage gift, who lives in me and makes the actual presence of you and your Father to dwell at home in my heart. I commit to following your path in all the affairs of my life, as your Spirit reveals your will to me through your Word. I will make it my lifelong ambition to be like you in all I think, do, and say. I will always choose to live for you and not for myself. You will be the center, focus, and goal of my life. I will keep my eyes fixed on you to the exclusion of everything that might distract me from following you. I will no longer live to win the approval of people, but I will aim only to please God because I am His child. I vow to never take any glory upon myself, but to give all glory to you, for there is room for only one glory in the Universe and that is yours. I acknowledge the unfailing love of the Father in giving you to me, and I promise to share this gift with everyone I can, all the days of my life.* It may be that some who are reading this will think that such a vow as I have written is excessive. You might feel that this is way too much to expect of a person first coming to Jesus and asking Him for mercy. After all, many who first approach Jesus Christ do so in a state of pain or desperation, and are in no frame of mind to be able to make the kind of commitment described above. You would be absolutely correct to say this. Jesus receives with open arms all who come to Him for mercy, and He does so without partiality or the expectation that the petitioner has

anything to offer him in return. However, that is not what I had in mind with this vow. What we are looking at here, is what it really means to make the choice to *follow* Jesus, to become His disciple, and to publicly declare this as your intent. As part of our first steps in obedience to Christ's command, we submit ourselves to believer's baptism. Through baptism, we are in a real sense, doing exactly what we have been describing. That is, we are making known through a public ceremony, our ambition to follow Jesus, and the commitment we have made to do exactly that. Typically, in modern churches, the candidate for baptism is asked a series of questions right before they are baptized. These questions are in essence the candidate's confession of faith in Christ that is being made in front of many witnesses. In many Christian traditions, there is some form of catechism provided to new believers to ensure that they really understand the Bible's basic teaching about Christ and salvation. To give baptism its intended meaning, and to secure the integrity of their beliefs, a church wants to be reasonably confident that the individual really understands the commitment they are making. While it is not my intention to suggest that a person professing faith in Christ be needlessly grilled with graduate level questions of theology prior to allowing them to be baptized - there must be some level of understanding of what is really involved in making such a profession of faith. Whether it is an adult being baptized or a child, they must understand at an age appropriate level what it is to give their life to Jesus Christ. A child cannot obviously appreciate all the implications involved in making such a life commitment. They can however understand what it means to make a promise to someone, and to have another person (in this case God) make a promise to them. A child, like an adult, is capable of a personal relationship with God, albeit one suited to their level of personal maturity. If the heart be sincere, no matter what the age level, God will accept the person and establish the relationship Himself. We can be confident of this based on such scriptural passages as John 6:37-38 NIV: "*All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*" Perhaps our churches are a bit too benignly lenient when explaining to a person what it means to give their life to Christ. We use phrases like, "invite Him into your heart." Words like these communicate well to contemporary ears. However, if we are not careful, we can leave a new believer with the impression that being in a relationship with the Lord is nothing more than a warm-fuzzy convenience, rather than what it really is – a death to our sinful human nature and a birth into a transformed life where all things become new. Everything we have talked about so far, has been to prepare us for a special invitation. We have been setting the table to come and dine with Jesus. Let us now partake of the bread of heaven and drink the living water set before us in the Word of God. Jesus' invitation to those who desire to follow Him, is given to us in all four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all read very similarly, except for some minor differences. John's version of Jesus' invitation is expressed somewhat differently, and I will touch on that later. I have chosen to focus on Luke's narrative of these words, due to his specific inclusion of the need to remind ourselves *daily* of what it means to follow Jesus. You can find the parallel passages in Matthew 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38; and John 12:23-26. "*23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. 25 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? 26 Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."*" Luke 9:23-26 NIV In normal everyday life, when we lose an object it is gone. The thing we have lost is not in our possession, and it is no longer possible to keep it safe. For example, my brother recently purchased a new cell phone. On a shopping trip to a retail store in a nearby town, he lost the phone somewhere along the way. It had fallen out of his pocket and he was unaware of it. The phone was lost and not retrievable. He had to purchase a new phone despite his regret at losing the original. All of us have had the unfortunate experience of losing something. It may be something small and insignificant, or it may be something that was of great value to us. Either way, whatever was lost is now absent from us and we no longer possess it. Not so in God's Arithmetic. In our walk in the Spirit, what oftentimes appears on the surface to be lost, has actually been preserved. According to Jesus, this is eminently so with regard to our soul – our true life.

There are things, Jesus tells us, that we must lose (give up or let go of) to follow Him. As we do so, we discover that what we thought was loss is actually gain. We can illustrate this from Luke's gospel in the following way.

Lose Gain

v.23 Self determination God's plan and purpose for us

v.23 A life of ease and leisure God's direction for a life of self sacrifice

v.24 Safety and Security Eternal Life

v.24 Living for my own interests The discovery of life's true meaning through dedication to Christ's message and teachings

v.25 The approval of the world Your true self (soul)

v.26 A refusal to bear reproach for Jesus sake Jesus personal acknowledgment of you when He returns

Before we can further spell out these aspects of Jesus' invitation, there are a few specific words that must be clarified. The first of these, is the word "cross." The cross represents our willingness to radically commit to God's will for us. This includes whatever suffering, sacrifice, and reproach, that accompanies such obedience - even to the point of death. The next word is "life."

Life (or *soul* -Gk. *Psuche*) is your full "personhood" inside and out - your unique inner life and total personality, emphasizing all you are as a human being apart from God. The last word is "world."

The world represents any and all approbation toward you, based on what is esteemed and valued by the vast societies of people living on earth apart from God. This includes all material possessions, and any other distinction the unbelieving culture holds in high regard. It would encompass any and all things you might be offered that could take the place of God in your life.

With these clarifications in mind, we can now examine Jesus' invitation to follow Him. We will look at what this invitation means to both those who are considering following Jesus, and those who have already determined to follow him.

The fact is that Jesus Christ is still reaching out to people all over the world. His invitation to follow Him - is as vital today as it was nearly two thousand years ago. He has commissioned His Church to partner with Him in bringing the message of the gospel to every person in all nations. Anyone wishing to accompany Jesus in the work of sharing God's love with everyone, must follow where He leads. For the would-be disciple, this means a willingness to place yourself geographically where God wants you - but it means more than that. A disciple is a learner. Jesus' desire is to teach us how to live our lives God's way. This teaching will include instruction on how to relate to others and serve their needs. It involves learning how to make priority decisions while experiencing the diverse complexities of life. Discipleship is learning how to live as a human being before God, as Jesus did. It is a life of service, and of looking at the world in a way that may often conflict with the views of our culture. As a result of following Jesus, we may be faced with choices that involve sacrifice or hardship. However, we are never alone or without comfort. To follow Jesus is to find a life that brings the only true peace and fulfillment to the soul of man. In another setting, Jesus put it this way:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Matthew 11:28-30 MSG To live like this in company with Jesus, is to live in the "unforced rhythms of grace." This is another way of saying what it truly means to live as a child of God. To be a follower of Jesus is to experience a life enveloped in God's grace. Jesus' words of invitation only seem harsh or painful to the mind of someone unwilling to follow Him. But for the seeker whose heart has been touched by God, or the disciple who has already chosen to follow after Him, the teachings of Christ bring blessing, peace, and true life. To wear the yoke of Jesus, to live as he lived, is to move daily in harmony with the will of God. A clear conscience, a peaceful mind, and a light heart, are descriptions that fall short in their effort to describe the blessedness of a life lived in close relationship to God. In connection to this invitation to follow Him, Jesus adds words that define the nature of the offer. His followers will have to deny themselves, and take up his cross daily. Jesus spoke these words because there are many who would follow him only for what they can get out of it for themselves. A good example of this is found in the gospel of John. Jesus had just fed 5,000 people with a few small loaves of bread and two fish. He crossed to the other side of the lake, and

the crowd followed looking for him. When they found Him, Jesus spoke these words: *"You've come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs — and for free."* John 6:26 MSG John gives us another example of this in his gospel. Jesus was in the town of Bethany, dining with his friends; Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (whom Jesus had raised from the dead). Mary had taken a very expensive container of perfume and used it to anoint Jesus' feet. Judas Iscariot (who would later betray Jesus), asked why such an expensive gift was used this way, rather than being sold to raise a good deal of money for the poor. At that point, John tells us something about Judas that belies his supposed concern for the poor. We can almost hear John whisper these words to us as an aside, as he says of Judas: *"But Judas did not really care about the poor; he said this because he was a thief. He was the one who kept the money box, and he often stole from it."* John 12:6 NCV There are a great many people today who are like both the crowd who sought Jesus only for food, and Judas who followed him only for personal gain. They are not sincere in their desire to follow Christ for who He is. What they are really trying to do is follow Jesus for what they can get out of it. Kind of a "what's in it for me" attitude. Such individuals do not really want to learn how to live a life in close relationship to God. Their real desire is selfish. They are asking, "how much is God going to give me if I favor Him with *my* presence?" These are not the kind of followers that Jesus is seeking. Therefore it was necessary for Him to make clear to those who were considering His claims and to those who already were with Him, what it really meant to be his disciple. When Jesus speaks of the necessity of denying yourself, it immediately addresses those who might follow Him for selfish reasons. To deny yourself is to make the most serious minded commitment to place God's will above your own. It is to move your entire existence in a direction that makes love for God your absolute ruling passion. When Jesus was asked to sum up what it means to fulfill the law of God, His answer was this: *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."* Mark 12:29b-31 NIV To deny oneself then, is to place God first in your life without reservation. It is to love Him in a way that makes your own personal desires subordinate to His direction in absolutely everything. It is to take anything or anyone else that you might make as a "god" in your life, and reject it - submitting instead, unconditionally to Christ. It is to place God's Kingdom and His way of life as your highest priority. Jesus put it this way in the Sermon on the Mount: *"You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both."* *"Seek first God's kingdom and what God wants. Then all your other needs will be met as well."* Matthew 6:24, 33 MSG All of us who desire to follow Jesus, do not have exactly the same issues that could hinder such a full and unreserved commitment to Him. For some, it might be an unwillingness to give up material possessions (cp. Luke 18:18-27). For others, it might be personal goals or ambitions (cp. Matthew 20:20-28). For still others, it may be family, friends, or a lifestyle they are unwilling to leave behind (cp. 2 Timothy 4:10a). Whatever it is that is personal and specific to you that stands in the way of your unconditional commitment to Christ - is what you must be willing to deny yourself to follow Him. He is worthy of no less, and will accept no less. To emphasize this kind of commitment even further, Jesus adds that we must take up our cross. This phrase is very often misunderstood. Our tendency as Christians is to suppose that whenever we are suffering for any reason, we are bearing our cross. Now it is true that we will suffer in this world. A popular recent advertisement for an insurance company declares that the world is filled with "mayhem". We endure pains and sorrows of many different kinds. There are physical pains and illness, financial losses and hardship, emotional heartaches and distress, and the mental anguish caused by our own sins, as well the sins of others. Despite our entire assortment of troubles, Jesus encourages us to take heart: *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* John 16:33 NIV Nonetheless, the suffering that is prevalent in our lives is not what Jesus has in view when He says we must take up our cross and follow Him. The cross, as I noted earlier, represents our willingness to radically commit to God's will for us. This includes whatever suffering, sacrifice, and reproach that accompanies such obedience, even to the point of death. What Jesus is saying to us, is that to live in relationship with

Him, is never going to be a halfhearted proposition. There is an expression in gambling that is used to declare one's intention to risk everything. A person will say they are "all in." Once announced, there is no going back. They are willing to risk everything on their decision. This is the meaning of the cross. Our life is decided. We risk everything, putting it all on the line to follow Jesus. There is no turning back regardless of the consequences of our obedience to God. Jesus knows we are weak, and that we will falter at times in our commitment. Nevertheless, his invitation to follow Him is intended to make clear the highest sense of service to God and man. Jesus seeks followers who will make their decision with eyes wide open. He wants this for those who are first considering His claims, as well as those who have already trusted Him. We should have no illusions about what is involved, if we want to experience the abundant life that He promises to those who belong to Him: *"My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."* John 10:10 NLT This life - purposeful, meaningful, and satisfying - can only be experienced as we get under the cross and take up Jesus' gentle yolk; cheerful loving obedience to God, lived out in a life of humble dedicated service to others. There is no need whatsoever for us to fear this kind of life. Some people have the strange idea that if they follow Christ, he will lead them into a life of misery. Nothing could be further from the truth. A spiritually minded person understands that complete dedication to Jesus, is the most satisfying life imaginable. Even if our circumstances turn out to be unfavorable at times, it is an unalterable truth in the Word of God that obedience to God brings blessing. When we follow the Holy Spirit's leading in our lives, the result is life and peace: *"Those who live following their sinful selves think only about things that their sinful selves want. But those who live following the Spirit are thinking about the things the Spirit wants them to do. If people's thinking is controlled by the sinful self, there is death. But if their thinking is controlled by the Spirit, there is life and peace."* Romans 8:5-6 NCV

A story was told recently by one of the leading pastors at my church. He was describing an encounter with God he had while on a mission trip to North Africa. Upon observing the single minded dedication of certain Christians who spent their lives serving in sparsely populated areas of that region, his conscience was troubled. He observed the joy and satisfaction these individuals had in giving their lives to bring the gospel to those who would otherwise never hear it. As he was leaving, God spoke to his heart regarding the matter of obedience. To the surprise of his companions, he was compelled to stop their vehicle, and walk out into a private place in the middle of nowhere to settle the matter with his Lord. He was convicted by the selfless dedication and spirit of service these people had demonstrated who were serving the Lord, and seemingly had so little. He realized that it was they who were fully experiencing the life that Jesus promised, due to their willingness to take up his cross and follow him. This pastor then resolved that no matter what the cost, he too would be willing to risk everything in obedience to Jesus. It isn't that we have to go to Africa or anywhere else to take up our cross. Wherever God has planted us, it is there that we must resolve to follow Jesus into a life that is not consumed with our own interests, but with His. Such a life will be joined with a community of other believers, sharing together in the work of bringing the gospel of Christ to a dying, hurting world. A world crying out for meaning, truth, and hope. Before we move on to the next part of Jesus' invitation, let's look at a word that Luke adds, which the other gospels omit. Jesus says the cross of which He speaks must be taken up by us *daily*. I believe this word is a special reminder that must be weighed by those who are first considering following Jesus, as well as those who have already made that choice. To take up the cross daily, is Jesus' way of emphasizing that this life of willing, obedient, sonship to God, must command our attention every day - all the way to the end of our lives. There is no time of life where we can casually lay the cross aside, and then take it up again at a time of our own choosing. That is not to say that there won't be seasons of life that demand our attention, or consume our hearts. I am thinking just now of a family in my church that has an infant child who is very ill - hanging between life and death. Through the prayers of many people, this baby has already come through several life threatening operations and procedures, just to stay alive. There remains the constant danger of infection, of heart or lungs failing, and the likelihood of permanent brain damage, even should the child recover. Surely, some will say, the cross must be laid aside just now! How can following Jesus be foremost on the mind of those parents at a time like this? It is exactly at a time like this, that we have our greatest opportunity to show the world what it really means to follow

Christ, wherever He might lead. To demonstrate unshakable trust in God's wisdom, love, and power in the midst of such a terrible time of suffering, is to allow Him to bring something quite extraordinary into our circumstance. For God can work into the lives of all involved, a demonstration of His love, that will etch into every heart, a confidence in Him that can never be removed or shaken. Only the Lord can take such painful experiences in life, and transform them into a means of help and blessing for everyone involved. Only He can help us see that the tragedy of the moment, is not the end of life. Even in the darkest hour, God is at work to bring the highest possible good to those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose (Rom.8:28). He gives us new eyes. Eyes that see beyond the sorrow of the moment. Eyes that perceive the divine love and purpose that are bringing spiritual blessing, and infusing it into the very occasion that caused the pain. This kind of insight can not always be put into words. It must be experienced by people of faith. We who have lived with Jesus through sorrow, understand that by following Him most closely when circumstances are at their worst, we experience the highest possible outcomes for ourselves and for everyone else in the orbit of our lives. Only God can bring triumph out of tragedy. Only He can bring life out of death. Only He can transform pain and make it a chariot, carrying us upward to a higher life. Daily, the cross is ours, and we lay it aside to our own detriment. To take up our cross daily, is also a reminder that as we live each new day with our eyes fixed on Jesus, it allows Him to give us eyes like His. We are surrounded each day by people with needs. Oftentimes, we are not aware of those needs. If we follow Jesus daily, we can learn to see with His eyes, to hear with His ears, to feel with His heart. We can develop a sensitivity to others that can not be acquired any other way but through a close walk with Him. For many years, I worked in large Welfare offices. I would often observe customers becoming increasingly angry with our staff as they spoke with them either on the phone or in person. In a great many of these situations, an already unpleasant confrontation could have been prevented from escalating, if our staff had simply taken the time to listen patiently. Instead, they would often respond in haste to people, with no regard for what their real need might actually be. Sometimes a person's real need is not so obvious. What they are saying on the surface, may not be what is really bothering them. We have all had times where we have vented in anger to someone (or they to us), and what is being spoken aloud is not the true reason for the anger. Suppose it's a rainy day, and you say to a member of your family, "It's a great day isn't it?" They reply grumpily, "What do you mean it's a great day? It's a terrible day. It's raining outside. Take your happy attitude and leave me alone!" Your immediate reaction to this might be, "Wow, what's wrong with you?!" Alternately, if you know the person to normally not be quite so grumpy, you might realize their reaction has nothing to do with you, or with the rain, per se. It may be that they were counting on going to a picnic that day, and it had been rained out. They are now somewhat angry or frustrated at not being able to enjoy the picnic. These feelings of disappointment are now being taken out on you, albeit unintentionally. So, after observing and listening carefully, instead of reacting angrily to their reply to your greeting, you choose to respond to them by saying, "What's really bothering you? Can I help?" What you have done now, is what I call *listening between the lines*. It is a way of reading someone's body language, inflections of voice, facial expressions, and character, in a way that really homes in on what their actual need may be. To be alert and sensitive in this way, requires us to live daily with a mindset that is more concerned for others than for ourselves. Only through a consistent and habitual walk with Jesus, taking up our cross daily to follow Him, can we cultivate the ability to see others as God sees them. Then, as we become more aware of the undisclosed needs around us, we can better minister to those individuals whom God has especially placed in our path. Jesus has begun the invitation to be his disciple by telling us of the necessity to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. In an effort to help us understand why it is so essential that this is the only way to be His disciple, He now explains the alternative choice. What is the consequence to us if we choose not to follow Him as a disciple? Here again, the language of scripture is the language of God's Arithmetic. We can only understand it by learning to see the big picture of life, God's way: "*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.*" (v.24) If you weren't already thinking hard about whether you really wanted to be Jesus' follower, you would certainly do so after hearing this verse and the one following it. For us to understand the wordplay here, we must be

absolutely clear on the meaning of the contrasting choices Jesus presents. *Life*, as I explained above, is all that you are as an individual person, inside and out. It encompasses your inner life and total personality - your life in the world as a distinct human being. It is what makes you - *you* - a complete living soul. The contrast Jesus makes here is not simple wordplay. It is about eternal destiny; life and death, salvation and eternal loss. There is for all of us, Jesus is saying, the choice of a path that results in utter and irrevocable loss to ourselves, and a divergent way that ends in everlasting gain. What then does Jesus mean when He says that we must lose our 'life' to save (or keep) it, and if we try to keep (or save) our 'life', we will lose it? It is the message of the gospel, *"There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12 NLT). For a person to live in this world with no regard for Jesus Christ is to *already* exist in a state of spiritual darkness and death (John 3:18, 36; John 5:24). The voice of God calling out the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, is reaching across the whole earth. It is to anyone who is willing to truly understand what God is offering, that Jesus speaks these words. To lose our life, means to give it to Jesus. To try to keep our life, is to reject the relationship with God that He offers us. When we enter a relationship with Jesus and agree to follow Him, we are promising to make choices in our lives that are guided by the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the will of God. We are committing to a path of life that involves all we have looked at regarding self denial and taking up our cross. This is what it means to follow Christ. If we refuse this offer, there is nothing else but the loss of our soul - our true self. Death is not the end. Life in this world is a prelude to a destiny that awaits each of us. All that you are as a total person, will either be retained by God and resurrected to new life in Christ, or it will be lost and have to bear forever the terrible consequences of sin. The Bible calls such loss, *hell*. It is God's desire that no person have to experience the inevitable aftermath of a life lived only for oneself, instead of a life lived in union with Jesus. All the choices we make in this world apart from living in relationship to Jesus Christ, no matter how much we may seem to have gained, can only end in irretrievable loss. All the choices we make in this world in obedience to Jesus, will inevitably end in eternal gain, no matter how much we may seem to have lost in the eyes of the world. Therefore, Jesus extends His invitation to each of us, and while he makes plain that we are free to reject his offer, he also makes it known that to do so leaves us with nothing. We will lose our true life with all that signifies. Nothing of our lives here will be retained. Nothing that has any lasting value can be kept with us. All that we are, and all we have been as a person is lost, and can never be reclaimed. Even worse, is that we will never know the meaning of true life - the quality and kind of life that can only be found in relationship to Jesus Christ. *"And this is the way to have eternal life — to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth."* John 17:3 NIV Before we leave this part of Jesus' invitation, there is an addition in Mark's gospel that is worthy of mention. Where Jesus says "whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:24), Mark adds, "for me **and for the gospel.**" Mark 8:35 NIV. Here is a reminder for us once again, that Jesus and His message are inseparable. We noted earlier that accepting Jesus' invitation into covenant relationship, means that as God's children we are part of a redeemed community of fellow believers - the Church. The Church expresses itself through local bodies of believers joined together to worship, grow, and serve the communities in which we live. Mark tells us that to live for Jesus is also to live for the spread of the gospel. We are to make it our ambition to advance the Kingdom of God by working together with others in our churches, to take the good news to the whole world (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Any talk of our obedience to God cannot be genuine, unless we are willing to do our part in fulfilling the commission Jesus gave to His Church. Although our participation may take many forms (e.g., prayer, giving, witnessing, the support of missionaries, etc.), the truth remains that we cannot say we are truly following Jesus, if we do not give our lives in service to the gospel. By tying together the giving of our lives for Jesus sake, and the sake of the gospel, Mark makes clear that we have not crowned Jesus as Lord unless we have made His goal our goal, His priority our priority, His passion our passion. There is one thing more to say about losing our lives for Jesus. Should it happen in the course of following Him that we should have to die for His sake and the sake of the gospel, our true life is safe. On one occasion, Jesus spoke these words to alleviate the fears of his followers: *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more."*

But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." Luke 12:4-7 NIV

All that we are as living souls - is safe with God. Our work finished on earth, we will be complete again in the glory of the resurrection. Even now, our old sinful self is dead: *"Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life — even though invisible to spectators — is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too — the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ."* (Colossians 3:3-4 MSG)

Here in the United States, in contrast to many places in the world today, it is unlikely that we will face martyrdom for our faith in Christ. I fear that many who call themselves Christians are living without a willingness to take any risks at all for the sake of Christ. Too often, our decisions are based on a search for safety, ease, and comfort. The American dream as we see it, is for "the good life." For the follower of Christ, this cannot be our goal. Our commitment to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus, must always be our paramount dream and aspiration. Anything less, is a sacrifice of all that makes life truly worthwhile as a child of God.

We have been speaking of Jesus' invitation to follow Him in terms of relationship. We have examined the meaning of the contrasting choices that such a relationship presents. We have also touched on the dire consequences that result from the decision to keep life for ourselves rather than surrender it to Christ, in exchange for the life He offers. We noted that without Jesus in our lives, no matter how much we may seem to have gained in this world, the end of life on earth can only result in irrecoverable loss. This is precisely what Jesus means as He continues to expand on the alternative to following Him. In these words, He asks a question that we all must answer, one way or another: *"And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?" Luke 9:25 NLT*

The answer to this question is self evident. Clearly, I have benefited *nothing* if I myself have been lost or destroyed. Jesus asked the question in this way for just that reason. He wanted everyone to know that apart from life in Him, there is nothing but eternal loss. No matter what you have accomplished, possessed, or gained in this life, it would never be enough to buy back your soul. Both Mark 8:37 and Matthew 16:26 add these words which follow directly after Luke 9:25: *"Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"* Again, the answer is unmistakable. Once this life on earth is spent, and Christ has been rejected, there is nothing whatsoever that we can do to redeem our soul. There isn't anything that you could offer God in payment to save you from death. Our sin has separated us from God, and death is the end result of that sin (Romans 6:23). Death is ultimately separation from God, and from anything that has any real meaning as *"life."* The life of God Himself, which the Bible calls eternal life, is in reality the only life that exists forever. This quality of life, with all the limitless fulfillment that it brings, is a gift of God's grace offered freely to us in Jesus Christ. There are no other alternatives. There exists only life in Christ - and death. Nothing else. This offer of eternal life in Christ, cannot be purchased or earned in this world or the world to come. It must be received as a gift. To receive God's gift, means the same as 'losing' your life for Jesus. The choice to receive salvation and all that accompanies it, and the choice to give yourself to Jesus, are two sides of the same coin. You trust in Him alone for your salvation. You give yourself to Him completely and without reservation. In doing so, you gain your soul. The Bible gives us an indication that those who die without Jesus will retain at least some memories of this life. Jesus tells an amazing story about two men who died, and the aftermath for each of them. It goes like this. . . *Jesus said, "There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man's table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores." Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and his soul went to the place of the dead. There, in torment, he saw Abraham in the far distance with Lazarus at his side. "The rich man shouted, 'Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.' "But Abraham said to him, 'Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish. And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from*

there." *"Then the rich man said, 'Please, Father Abraham, at least send him to my father's home. For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them so they don't end up in this place of torment.'"* *But Abraham said, 'Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.'"* *The rich man replied, 'No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.'"* *But Abraham said, 'If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead.'"* *Luke 16:19-31 NLT*

There are several different spiritual lessons that can be drawn from this story. For the purpose of this discussion, let us focus on the matter of memories. This is really a sad story, and is intended to be so. One of the things I believe Jesus wanted to convey to us, is the connection between choice and regret. We see from the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, that the suffering man had memories of his life on earth. He remembered the good things he had during his lifetime - and the poverty and want that Lazarus had experienced. He also remembered his brothers and his love for them. His pleading with Abraham shows the regrets he had for the choices he had made in life like neglecting his relationship with God, and having no concern for the poor. This rich man, is now in want and realizes that the life he chose for himself cannot be changed. Not only can he not undo the sins that led to his own destiny, he can no longer do anything to help those he cares for, who are still alive in the world - to make better choices for themselves. This story makes clear that the choices we make in this life on earth, have lasting consequences; and that once made, we cannot get them back. Our lives here and now are often defined in terms of loss and pain. Life holds many sorrows that most of us would gladly do without. When a person suffers some terrible loss, we might hear them say, "I'd give anything in the world if only I could have _____." There are many ways to fill in the blank. We may have regrets, and wish we could have back a choice we made. We may desire to relive a moment of time that caused ourselves or others great sorrow. We may be expressing a want or desire, a yearning for a return to good health, the restoration of a broken relationship, or the recovery of a bitter financial loss. Maybe it's the longing to say something to a departed loved one; something we meant to say, but due to their death, never had the opportunity. Sometimes our losses are the result of our choices, and sometimes they are the result of the sin filled world in which we live. In either case, there are times when we would give anything if only we could have what we long for so much. Let me suggest that there is one loss that surpasses all others. One loss that is so great, that Jesus declares all other losses pale by comparison. That loss is the forfeiture of your soul. No matter what else you might experience in life, when all is said and done - all that is left is you. With all that you really are in totality as a person - your soul is the only thing of value that you ultimately cannot afford to lose. To lose your soul is to lose everything. It is to exist forever with memory of suffering and sorrow, choices and failures, loss and regrets. It is to live in eternal torment, without hope, knowing that your true life, the life God meant for you to have in relationship to Him, is lost forever; and there is not a single thing that you or anyone else can do to get it back again. We must choose life, choose now, choose to follow Christ. His invitation is open today. We must respond to Jesus while the opportunity to follow Him is still available to us. We have spoken a great deal up to this point, about the alternative consequences of our life choices. Jesus concludes His loving invitation to follow Him, with a statement that confirms the ultimate issue of where our decision (to follow Him or not) leads: *"Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."* *Luke 9:26 NIV*

Have we tried to save (keep) our life, or have we lost (given) it for Jesus? Here we are confronted by this choice one last time, with an exclamation point! The emphasis here is on the time of final judgment. We see this also in another passage of scripture, where Jesus portrays Himself as the Son of Man to whom all judgment has been given: *"Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."* *"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned."* *John 5:24-29 NIV*

It will be absolute folly for anyone to disregard

the Lord Jesus Christ - the one who is the final judge. We are powerfully reminded in Luke 9:26 that although Jesus' glory was not recognized while he was here on earth (cp. John 1:10,14), He is the one who shares the glory of the Father. He is the heir of all things and it is He through whom the whole Universe was created (John 17:24; Heb.1:2-3; Col.1:15-17). When Jesus returns to judge the world, where will you be found? Will you be an heir of God and co-heir with Christ; as one who united with Him and has suffered for Him (Rom.8:17)? Or, will you be as those who never took God's will seriously, but were only pretenders? Jesus always knows the difference between true and false disciples: *"Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'" Matthew 7:21-23 NLT* How bitter it will be for those who must hear from Jesus those terrible words, "I never knew you." Yet that is the outcome for those who are ashamed of Him now. What does it really mean to be ashamed of Jesus and His words (message, teaching)? What does it mean for Jesus to be ashamed of us when He returns? 'Ashamed' is an interesting word. The Apostle Paul uses it when he declares: *"I am not ashamed of the Good News, because it is the power God uses to save everyone who believes — to save the Jews first, and then to save non-Jews." Romans 1:16 NCV* The word 'ashamed' is defined by dictionary.com as, "feeling ashamed; distressed or embarrassed by feelings of guilt, foolishness, or disgrace." It is further defined as, "unwilling or restrained because of fear of shame, ridicule, or disapproval." Both of these nuances give force to what Jesus was saying. Paul, as quoted above, is a perfect example. He neither felt ashamed by the proclamation of the gospel, nor did he allow himself to hold back from evangelism due to fear of reproach from others. Jesus is not speaking here however, of those momentary lapses when courage deserts us, or of those times when we fail to speak for Him as we should, in situations where we have opportunity to do so. If that were the case, I'm afraid Jesus would have cause to be ashamed of all of us! What we have here again, is the outcome of the choices we have made that decide our eternal destiny. Those who reject Jesus and His teachings, will never stand up proudly on His behalf. They will always have a sense of disgrace or embarrassment because of who Jesus is, and what He has done on the cross. To such people, the cross of Christ and the message of His love and shed blood, will always be nothing more than foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18,23). They will never live in selfless service to Him, or to others in His name. They will always disassociate themselves from Him, his message, His people, His teachings, and all that truly represents Him. To confess and acknowledge Jesus as their Lord before men, would be unknown to them. This parallels what Jesus told His disciples on another occasion when He said: *"Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven." Matthew 10:32-33 NIV* This is also what Paul means when he tells his beloved son Timothy: *"Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself." 2 Timothy 2:11-13 NIV* To disown someone, is to refuse to acknowledge that person as belonging or pertaining to you. We might say today that one person is a known associate of another person. Associates are collaborators, companions, partners, co-workers, and friends with that individual. That is what our life in Christ must be. We must be known associates of Jesus. To be identified in this manner, is what it means to not be ashamed of Him. To refuse to join Him in the newness of life that He offers, is to end up with Him refusing to acknowledge you - as one who belongs to Him. There are many worthy Biblical examples of what it means to be unashamed of Christ. We find faithful people like Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Samuel, David, Daniel, Mary (Jesus' mother), Mary Magdalene, Paul, the twelve Apostles, and a host of others. The Bible shares the stories of many such people of faith who boldly identified themselves with God, and refused to be ashamed to bear reproach for His name. I want to point out one Biblical example that we can all readily relate to - someone who stood tall for God despite the fear, ridicule, and persecution he had to endure. For most of this man's life, he was ostracized by others for his stand in the Lord. Yet he, like us, did not always deal with mistreatment without tears or complaint. The prophet Jeremiah is a man whose life is replete with examples of bearing shame and disgrace for

God, and for the message he proclaimed as God's spokesman. On several occasions, he had very honest and intimate conversations with God regarding the struggle he faced to stay faithful to his calling. The Lord needed to continually reassure Jeremiah that he must not be ashamed to represent Him, or the message he needed to bring to his people. God gave him strength for his task, and comfort in the midst of persecution. As we observe Jeremiah's behavior, we see a man who was patently unashamed of God and His Word. Even while he struggled with emotional turmoil, he continued to deny himself, and take up his cross in obedience to God. From the events in Jeremiah's life throughout the course of his prophetic ministry, we can observe a variety of afflictions that could have enticed Jeremiah to be ashamed of the Lord whom he so faithfully served. An account of these afflictions is extensive: Jeremiah was falsely accused of treason, and then was thrown into a dungeon for many days. He attempted to befriend a king who professed to respect him, yet who would neither listen to his godly counsel nor stand up for him when others sought his life. Jeremiah was often hungry and lonely, with only an occasional friend or supporter to help and comfort him. He was abandoned in a large filthy hole in the ground and left to die, with his only crime being a passionate love for the nation, and a desire to see his people turn back to God and avoid disaster. He was continually brokenhearted over the sins of his countrymen, and often would plead to God with tears for their survival. Despite his steadfast faithfulness to God and country, he was never thanked, appreciated, or praised for his efforts. There was no money in it for him, nor fame, honor (during his lifetime), position, or privilege. He was forbidden by God to ever marry or have a family. After over 40 years of honorable, unwavering, and patriotic ministry, he was rewarded with only his life as a prize. The man who said to the nation, "For I know the plans I have for you", declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future", was himself seemingly 'without hope or a future'. He was ultimately taken from his home against his will to Egypt - coerced by cruel and brutal men. There he eventually died, far from the land he loved, and brokenhearted over the tragedy that had befallen his nation. Despite all the sorrow of his life, Jeremiah never lost faith in God or failed to do His will. Some of his final words on record are these: *"The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, 'The LORD is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!' The LORD is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the LORD."* Lamentations 3:19-26 NLT

The man who wrote these words was indeed God's prophet, but he was really no different from you and me. As we look at his life, we are reminded that God can also help us to take a stand for Christ despite our struggles and weaknesses. Jeremiah's temptations came from the world, the flesh, and the devil, just as ours do. It is because he has been called "the weeping prophet", that he was so likened to our Savior in his heart and spirit (cp. Matthew 16:14). When we review his ministry, we have a most poignant picture of what Jesus meant when he said: *"If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."* Mark 8:38 NLT

I am often reminded of a false notion held by many Christians towards these notable servants of God (like Jeremiah). As we read the wonderful faith exploits of Bible characters, we often think that we could never live up to their level of commitment and faithfulness. What we fail to realize, is that they are all human beings just like we are. God used them in marvelous ways despite the same imperfections, frailties, and shortcomings in their lives as we have (cp. James 5:17; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10). The truth is, it is everyday folks (like us) that God delights to use for His glory. Most of us tend to think of ourselves as very ordinary people. While we admire individuals like Jeremiah, we still wonder whether God can use 'ordinary people' today. Let me introduce you to an 'ordinary' young boy from the church I attend, who God is using to make a real difference in the lives of others. . *In the spring of 2004, nine year old Austin Gutwein watched a video that showed children who had lost their parents to AIDS. After watching the video, he realized these kids weren't any different from him except they were suffering. Austin felt God calling him to do something to help them. He decided to shoot free throws; and on World AIDS Day, 2004, he shot 2,057 free throws to represent the 2,057 kids who would be orphaned during his*

day at school. Friends and family sponsored Austin and he was able to raise almost \$3,000. That year, the money was used to provide hope to 8 orphan children. Over the past eight years, Austin's effort has turned into the largest free throw marathon in the world with an estimated 40,000 people in more than 25 countries participating in Hoops of Hope. By doing something as simple as shooting free throws, Hoops of Hope participants have raised more than \$2.5 million. The efforts have led to the construction of the only high school in a rural region in Southern Zambia, four dormitories, two medical clinics (which he was told would save an entire generation), a computer laboratory, multiple water projects, as well as the funding of a dormitory at an orphanage in Kenya and a school in India. Austin has been featured on NBC Today Show, NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, CBS NCAA Pregame Show, Time Magazine, Christianity Today and many others. He has had the opportunity to share his story of hope to more than 500,000 people on four continents including stops at the Secondary School's United Nations Symposium in Montreal and the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Austin's message is one of hope. **A message that anyone, no matter what their age or skills has a purpose and can make a difference that lasts forever.** His message weaves stories from his many trips to Africa that will leave the listener inspired and encouraged to make a difference.

God's Arithmetic is a metaphor for empowering you to add up life from God's perspective. In this book, you will be challenged to discover new insights from some well-known scriptures. You will explore classic stories from many books in the Bible, and learn the deeper meanings behind them. You will also enjoy discovering new truths from many passages you thought you knew well, and learning how God intends for you to apply them in your daily life. Together, we will move past many commonly held misconceptions of our faith, and discover what it truly means to be a growing Christian in our modern world. As you learn to live by God's Arithmetic and pattern your life in ways that honor Him, you become a fruitful citizen of God's Kingdom. Do you believe the Lord is calling you to be a more faithful committed disciple? Let's find out together.

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