

New Direction

for finding...

- New confidence about your understanding of the gospel
- New certainty about living as a follower of Christ
- New depth to your relationship with God

Conversation 1

by Don Willett, Ph.D.



New Direction

Conversation 1

God's Plan of Salvation: It's Fundamental to Your Journey of Faith



What do you think of when you hear the word—the name—*God*?

How would you describe your relationship with God?

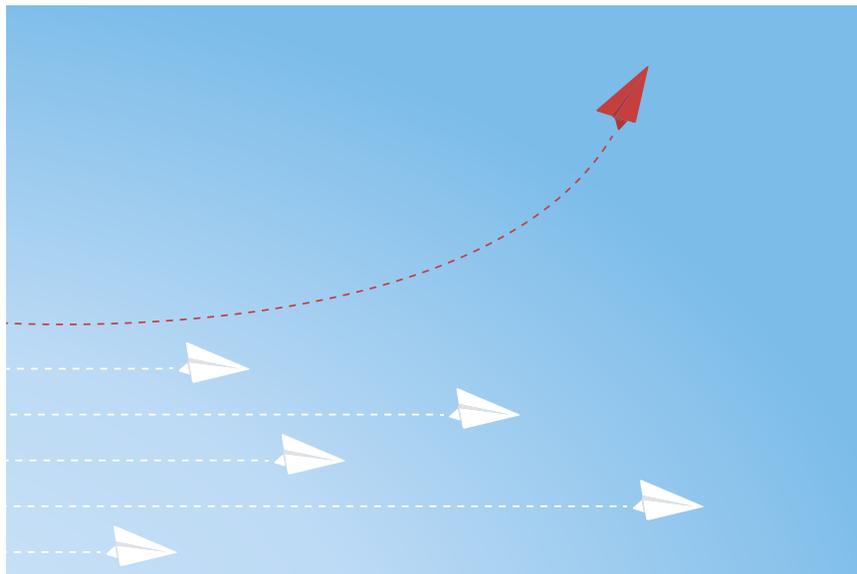
We're going to take a look at some truths about God to help you determine if you want to walk with Him, run from Him, or know more about Him.

I'm glad you're taking some time to get a more solid grasp of both God's character and His plan of salvation--and that process will last a lifetime! As we meet together and talk, I think you will see your journey of faith head in a new direction, one that will yield a richer, more intimate relationship with Jesus. The first two Conversations focus on

four truths about God's plan of salvation, and understanding these is vital to your journey of faith.

New Direction will challenge the *whole* of you—your mind, your emotions, and your will—because all three are components of your growth as a follower of Christ. That's why each Conversation is designed to enable you to:

- *Learn what the Bible teaches and better understand truths that are fundamental to the Christian faith*
- *Become more confident about your personal relationship with God and His love for you*
- *Respond to the Bible's teachings by doing what God calls you to do*



God's Plan of Salvation

So let's look closely at four truths about God's plan of salvation.¹ Be certain to involve your mind, your emotions, and your will as you consider each one. Doing so will lead you to a deeper, richer relationship with Jesus, and energize you with strength to go far on the journey as a Christ follower.

Truth 1 God's Purpose for Us: Peace and Life

God wants you to know fullness of life here and now as well as life eternal, and that is possible because of the gift of His Son, Jesus, who died on the cross for your sins and mine so that we who are sinners may be at peace with our holy God and in relationship with Him and with Jesus our Savior. We hear these truths from Jesus Himself:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." – John 3:16

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." – Jesus in John 10:10

Why don't most people experience this peace and fullness of life that God planned for us? Here are two reasons:

1. Only God can fill the our emptiness. As philosopher Blaise Pascal put it, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that only God Himself can fill."

2. We search in all the wrong places to fill this void. Theologian St. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."

We will remain empty and restless as long as we look in all the wrong places for what only God Himself can provide.



What are some things that people search after for contentment, happiness, and fulfillment?... That seeking is an effort to fill the God-shaped void.

You don't have to answer this aloud, but at least think about it: With what have you tried--or are you trying--to fill the God-shaped vacuum inside you?

Truth 2 The Problem: Our Separation from God

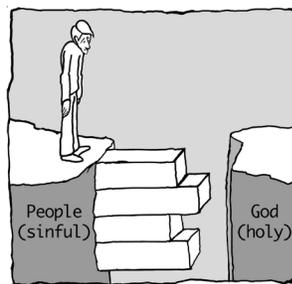
Hear what the Bible, God's Word, has to say about our empty and restless condition. The starting point is the truth that we are sinners both by birth and by choice. In other words, we sin because we are sinners (by our flawed human nature), and we are sinners because we sin (by willful intent). Let it sink in... Our trouble is that we are damaged and broken. And we are rebellious, demanding life on *our* terms. Consequently, a great gulf separates us sinful human beings from our holy God.

"No one is good—no one in all the world is innocent." – Romans 3:10 (TLB)

"Yes, all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal." – Romans 3:23 (TLB)

"For the wages of sin is death." – Romans 6:23

The legally appropriate penalty for this sin is our separation from God, both now and for eternity. Our holy and just God is bound by His very nature to punish the guilty. Such punishment is not unfair; in fact, it points to His just nature.



As the illustration to the left shows, all of our efforts to please God by obeying His law fall short: we are not able to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, nor are we able to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet still we try to gain God's approval and acceptance.



What are four ways people try to gain God's approval?

Now imagine trying to jump across the Grand Canyon. Some of us will leap farther than others do, but all of us will fall far short of the other side. Similarly, some of us will lead "less sinful" lives than others, but all of us will fall short of living completely according to our holy God's standard. None of us can earn His acceptance.

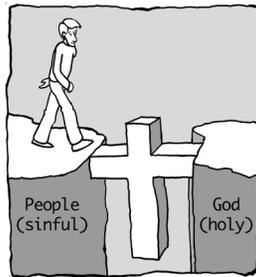
Also consider a baseball player's batting average. All ballplayers fall short of batting a thousand. That would only happen if a batter got a hit every time he was at bat. Most players voted into the Hall of Fame have hit under .330, which is about one hit out of every three times at bat. That is far from perfection, as are any of our attempts to obey all of God's commands. Be assured, too, that God doesn't

lower His standards, grade on a curve, or select only a few to a spiritual Hall of Fame because they have achieved more holiness than others.

All of your efforts and mine fall short of God's standard. You and I can never earn our way to heaven. Isn't it good that the story doesn't end there!

Truth 3 God's Bridge: The Cross

We are separated from God because of our sin. You and I can't cleanse and repair ourselves and move closer to our holy God. Only God can bridge this gap—and He has! He has provided the one and only way we can be saved from the penalty of our sin. This provision is purely a gift from Him: this divine gift of salvation is unexpected, undeserved, and something we can never earn, something we can never repay. Salvation is a free gift. Acting on His love and grace, God has made it possible for you and me to experience peace with God now and life with Him for eternity.



“What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-6

- Grace is getting what we don't deserve: it is grace to receive from God the opportunity for salvation and a personal, eternal relationship with Him.
- Mercy is not getting what we do deserve: it is mercy that we are not sentenced to eternal separation from God, though that is exactly what we deserve.

Jesus died in our place as our substitute: He paid the penalty for our sins so that we don't have to.

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” – Romans 5:8

Believing in this Romans 5:8 truth--believing that Jesus is God's Son who died for our sins and rose again-- is the only way we can be in relationship with God. This exclusive claim distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. Jesus made it clear:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” – Jesus in John 14:6

Jesus rose from the dead, and Scripture contains irrefutable evidence—including eyewitness reports—of this fact. Here is the testimony of the apostle Paul:

Scripture provides irrefutable evidence of the Resurrection, and the Resurrection is irrefutable evidence of God's love for you even in your emptiness, restlessness, and brokenness. Through the Resurrection, our holy God has provided the way for us sinners to know Him, walk through life with Him, and spend eternity with Him.



What keeps people from believing the Resurrection?

What solid and/or logical evidence can help you defend the truth that God did raise Jesus from the dead?

Acknowledging that our sins have separated us from God; recognizing that Jesus, God's Son, shed His blood and died as the perfect sacrifice to pay for those sins; realizing that He rose from the dead victorious over sin and death; and, trusting Jesus as our personal Savior and choosing to follow Him as Lord—these steps are a solid foundation for the journey of faith, a journey in a new direction toward certainty about life as a follower of Christ, toward a deeper relationship with Jesus, and toward a solid understanding of the gospel that prepares us to share it with confidence.

Truth 4

Our Response: Receive Christ

Our journey in that new and very rich direction begins when we invite Jesus into our life—into our empty, restless, broken lives; when we—faults and all— receive Him as our Savior.

“Yet to all who did receive [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” – John 1:12

The act of receiving Jesus, God’s gift to us, is an act of choosing to believe that He is a gift of grace given to us by God as an act of mercy. The act of receiving Jesus is an act of faith.

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this [salvation] is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” – Ephesians 2:8-9

We have an opportunity to receive Christ because He extends to us a personal invitation. Jesus actually desires to be at the center of your life, and He takes the initiative to make that happen.

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” – Jesus in Revelation 3:20



What is the significance of Jesus knocking on your door? Taking into consideration His ranking in the universe, other options He has, why He might choose this method, what this action says about His view of you, etc., share at least three points.

Jesus knocks at the door of your heart because He wants to fill the God-shaped void within us, to end our restless search for meaning, and to begin, strengthen, and/or enrich His relationship with you. But the door has a doorknob only on the inside, and only you can turn it. Jesus will not force His way into your life. He waits to be invited in and welcomed.

Now notice that if we open the door, Jesus said not merely that He *might* come in, but He promised that He *will* come in.

And we can count on the absolute trustworthiness of His promise. We can be assured that He will come in to stay and will stay for the long haul. We can be certain that He will never leave. After all, His purpose is to establish an intimate, fulfilling, and lasting relationship with each of us.



Look at Revelation 3:20 again. According to this verse, where is Jesus in relation to those who receive Him?

Why is a relationship with us more significant to Him if, rather than having to force His way into our lives, we welcome Him?

Receiving Christ—living with Him as Savior, the One who saved us from eternal separation from God, and as Lord over your life— involves, first, recognizing that our restless journey through life has been self-centered, driven by our sinful self, and consequently empty. After admitting our self-centeredness—our sin—to ourselves and to God, then we turn toward our holy and loving God (the Bible calls this repentance). We trust Christ to forgive our sins, and we yield to Him so that, by the power of His Holy Spirit, He can--over time--make us the person He wants us to be.

To merely know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have the emotional experience of being convicted about the ugliness of our sin or moved by God’s amazing love. We also need to make a decision to receive Jesus Christ, to welcome Him as Lord, and that is an act of our will. We choose to thoroughly commit to God all that we are--mind, emotions, and will.

Then we will be able to sing these classic words by John Newton:

*“Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.”*

What Have I Learned?

I want to finish up by asking you if you have any questions...

We've looked at the four truths about salvation:

- God's Purpose for Us: Peace and Life
- The Problem: Our Separation from God
- God's Bridge: The Cross
- Our Response: Receive Jesus as Savior and Lord



What is one thing you learned?

How would you finish this sentence? It was helpful for me to realize that...

I hope we can get together again soon. When we do, next time in *Conversation 2*, we will further consider God's amazing plan of salvation and what it means to travel the journey of faith well.

Notes:

1. In *New Direction*, I've adapted the simple schematic designed by Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (Orlando, FL: New Life Resources, 2005). I was also influenced by Billy Graham's *Steps to Peace with God* (Carol Stream, IL: Crossway, 2012), and the Navigator's *Bridge to Life* (NavPress: Colorado Springs, Co).

- I asked myself, "Why should I reinvent the wheel?" I looked to the evangelistic ministries of Cru (formerly Campus Crusade), and Billy Graham, as well as The Navigators, to see how they present and illustrate the basics of the Gospel message.
- Notice that I've changed the four *Laws* and four *Steps* to four "Truths." Each Truth has been expanded and fleshed out to make room for deeper understanding and for engaging Conversations – allowing the Holy Spirit to meet us just where we are.
- In *New Direction*, we don't hurry the learner to a quick, superficial decision. Perhaps we've lost the full impact of the Gospel in dumbing it down. In *New Direction* we hope to release the four dynamic Truths in such a way as to make the Good News of God's plan of salvation clear and compelling.

Don Willett, Ph.D.

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