

The Truth as I See It

A Collection of Spiritual Writings



Adam Soto

GOLDEN RULE INDEPENDENT PUBLICATIONS

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Dear reader,

The book you are about to read is broken up into many different sections. Each section was written at a different time in my life. Putting expression to my experiences with God and my understanding of spiritual matters has been a process for me. I never had any intention of writing a large book. Mostly, I wanted to share with my family and friends the story of my journey with God. Over time, as I continued to grow and evolve spiritually, I found that I had more to express, and would write small chapbooks to share with those who were interested.

Eventually, it seemed like a good idea to put all of these smaller writings together. To accomplish this task, I knew that I had various options; I could try to re-write everything to make one large text, or leave each smaller writing as it was originally expressed.

In the end, I chose to leave each writing mostly in tact. Being content in the way that I expressed my mind and soul in each of the smaller writings, I thought it best to leave them as they were.

A consequence of this choice is that there are parts of my story which overlap or are repeated. Please forgive me for this. Hopefully you find that it doesn't take away from the impact and message that was intended.

- Adam Soto

Mind and Purpose

Introduction

So many people in the world are suffering things that they should never have to suffer simply because they fail to understand the most basic operations of their mind and existence in general.

It is no small exaggeration to say that what plagues mankind is a simple lack of self-observation or self-study. *We don't know ourselves.* We're born, we live and die, and still we have no idea who or what we are.

It's shocking, really—that we can look at, explore, and analyze so much in this world, from the smallest subatomic particle to the furthest corners of the universe, and still not know *ourselves*.

What's even more amazing is that there are some throughout history who have known themselves, and shared of that knowledge, and it readily exists for us to absorb, emulate, and analyze, and still people suffer. Even with the entire internet at our fingertips, most people never bother to educate themselves in self-knowledge.

Why is this? Don't people want to be happy? Wouldn't they rather *not* suffer?

Anthony deMello, Jesuit priest and psychologist, sums it up well:

“Take a look at the world and see the unhappiness around you and in you. Do you know what causes this unhappiness? You will probably say loneliness or oppression or war or hatred or atheism. And you will be wrong. There is only one cause of unhappiness: the false beliefs you have in your head, beliefs so wide-spread, so commonly held, that it never occurs

to you to question them. Because of these false beliefs you see the world in a distorted way. Your programming is so strong and the pressure of society so intense that you are literally trapped into perceiving the world in this distorted kind of way. There is no way out, because you do not even have a suspicion that your perception is distorted, your thinking is wrong, and your beliefs are false.”^[1]

According to deMello, people suffer because of their beliefs—or rather, their distorted perceptions of reality. But where do these beliefs come from? How did we get this way?

Most of these beliefs are handed down from generation to generation, through culture, society, and religion. Most exist simply to perpetuate and maintain some sort of established control system, either political, philosophical, or religious. Throughout history, once an organization or group of people establishes some form of domination over large groups of people, the only way to maintain that power is through control systems. The most important element in controlling masses of people is to control their *minds*, for from the mind comes all action and behavior. This isn't the making of a conspiracy theory—on the contrary, it's Psychology 101—and History 101, for that matter.

So from an early age we're bombarded with control mechanisms designed to shape our minds and behavior, to keep us under control. It's no coincidence that we're never taught the basics of self-knowledge in school or in our religions because that would free us from their control. Once enlightened, we would realize that we're being psychologically tampered with, and we'd throw off our mental chains and live as free people, no longer accepting the legitimacy of any controlling domination system.

Awareness is the key to everything. We must understand our programming and our own minds first and foremost, observing how the mind operates, and become acquainted with certain natural laws asso-

ciated with the functioning of the mind. Then we need to question the ideas and belief systems that shape our mind and behavior, both internally and externally, freeing our minds from any untruth or programming we find there. And finally, we must explore the world in and around us, trying to discover and experience truth for ourselves. In the process—and in the results—lie the keys to our happiness and freedom.

As you will see from reading this book, the search for truth and self-discovery inevitably leads one to confront one of the greatest mysteries of existence—the question of whether or not there is a God or spiritual element to existence. These and similar questions simply cannot be avoided if one is to conduct a logical and comprehensive exploration of existence.

These questions are, by their very nature, the most difficult to answer, as any evidence collected or explored falls outside of our normal investigation process. As a society, we've grown accustomed to testing the truth or validity of a theory through physical experimentation, relying on our five physical senses first and foremost; if we can measure it, then we can test it, see how it reacts in a controlled environment, deduce certain attributes that define its nature, qualities, and character, and finally, label it.

In the natural world, this process is fairly reliable, and helps in organizing and understanding everyday life. But to apply these same physical methods to spiritual matters makes no sense, as our subject matter is nonphysical, at least in any way that we are aware of at this time.

In essence, then, if the physical world is explored and tested using physical methods, it stands to reason that the spiritual world would be tested using spiritual methods. This, of course, implies the existence of an individual soul, or spirit. Although many mystics and spiritual people have claimed to have had first-hand experiences of God and their own souls, it's unverifiable in a physical sense, as there's no sci-

entific way to test the truth or accuracy of spiritual claims. It seems that the most one can hope for is to experience “God” or spiritual matters for themselves; then—and only then—can spiritual truths be tested and verified.

Now that I’ve summarized what I’d like to explore in this section of the book, I’d like to move on to section one—Mind.

Mind

Understand Your Mind

“As the Arabs say, ‘The nature of the water is the same. But it makes thorns in the marshes and flowers in the gardens.’” [2]

- Anthony deMello, *Awareness*

In attempting to understand your mind, there is one principle that needs to be understood above all others; let’s call it the “energy-flow” principle. Simply put, the mind is like an energy conductor; it gathers and directs energy. The basic principle of energy in relation to the mind is that wherever energy goes, something grows. Whether it’s good or bad, positive or negative, it doesn’t matter. Where energy goes, something grows.

Fortunately, within each of us there is the mysterious presence of whatever makes us conscious, an individuality or “I.” Within this presence is the power to direct the flow of energy, what’s typically called the “individual will.” This *will-power* is like a muscle in our minds—the more we use it, the stronger it gets. If developed to its full strength, it can direct the energy flow with complete mastery.

James Allen, philosopher and author, sums it up well in his book *As a Man Thinketh*:

“A man’s mind may be likened to a garden, which may be intelligently cultivated or allowed to run wild; but whether cultivated or neglected, it must, and will *bring forth*. If no useful seeds are *put* into it, an abundance of useless weed-seeds will *fall* therein, and will continue to produce their kind.

“Just as a gardener cultivates his plot, keeping it free from weeds, and growing the flowers and fruits which he requires, so may a man tend the garden of his mind, weeding out all the wrong, useless, impure thoughts, and cultivating toward perfection the flowers and fruits of right, useful, and pure thoughts. By pursuing this process, a man sooner or later discovers that he is the master gardener of his soul, the director of his life. He also reveals, within himself, the laws of thought, and understands, with ever-increasing accuracy, how the thought forces and mind elements operate in the shaping of his character, circumstances, and destiny.”^[3]

So within each of us is the power to direct our energy, shape our mind, and influence our character and circumstances. What’s so interesting from the quote above is the idea that whatever seeds are placed in the mind, whether *we* put them there or not, will grow.

If we relate this to the aforementioned quote from Anthony deMello about beliefs and understand how religion, culture, and society has helped to shape our minds since infancy, we will realize that at least some, if not most, of the seeds that entered and grew in our minds are not our own; they were put there by someone else.

If the seeds that were put there are good seeds, than perhaps everything is okay and there is no problem. But are they good seeds? How can one tell if they are good seeds or bad? One way would be to see what kind of fruit has been produced.

Look around you—are most people generally happy? Are they peaceful and carefree, living in harmony with themselves and the

world around them? Or do they seem to be unhappy, anxious, always flustered and fighting with people in their lives, victims of their own troubled minds and emotions? Now ask yourself these same questions. If you see within yourself and the world around you evidence of unhappiness and chaos, perhaps it's time to re-evaluate the garden of your mind.

The number one tool at your disposal to help understand your mind is the tool of *self-observation*. Developing this tool is easy; simply pay attention to your mind and thought processes, but do it as if you were an outside observer. Watch your mind in play, at work, in your relationships ... in all of the activities that make you happy and sad, confident and afraid, discontent or peaceful. Just watch and experience your own mind. See the energy flow first-hand, how thoughts lead to actions, how actions lead to results, and how results lead to *reactions*, both within yourself and the people and world around you. Take note of which thoughts and actions bring you and those around you joy and peace, and which ones bring unhappiness and turmoil. And of course, observe this process in the lives of the people around you as well.

Eventually, once you've observed your mind long enough to get a good understanding of its functioning, then it's time to move on to the next step—the step of *freeing* your mind.

Free Your Mind

“I divide men into two lots. They are freethinkers, or they are not freethinkers. Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, and beliefs. This state of mind is not common, but it is essential for right thinking; where it is absent, discussion is apt to become worse than useless. A man may be a Catholic, a Frenchman, or a capitalist, and yet be a freethinker; but if he

puts his Catholicism, his patriotism, or his interest above his reason, and will not give the latter free play where those subjects are touched, he is not a freethinker. His mind is in bondage.”^[4]

- Leo Tolstoy

Once you’ve observed your mind and the way it functions, it’s now time to *question everything!* Re-evaluate everything you’ve ever been told. Dig up the garden of your mind. Analyze every tree, flower, and seed. If it is good, keep it. Replant it. Nurture it. Water it. Give it plenty of attention and sunshine and help it grow. If it is bad, throw it away! Cut it down! Get rid of it immediately! And be on guard lest these seeds try to get back into your garden. If some bad seeds somehow slip in, pull them out at the earliest sign of observation. Garden your mind in this way.

The task of gardening your mind, though easy to explain, is extremely difficult. Some seeds have grown into large trees with roots that penetrate to the very core of your being. These roots have wrapped themselves around you so completely that it would seem impossible to cut or kill them without cutting or killing yourself.

Over time, we come to *identify* with the thoughts, trees, and flowers in our garden (mind). One tree may be called *ego*. Another is *desire*. Another is called *attachment* ... and so the garden grows. The stronger we identify with each tree, the harder it is to let go.

So what do you identify with? It’s time to question everything! For many of us, we identify with our ego, a certain element of the mind that always wants more for *itself*—more attention, more possessions, more *control* over others ... more, more, more, more, more; and it doesn’t usually care who it hurts in the process as long as it gets what it wants.

Otherwise known as *selfishness*, this desire for more separates and alienates us from the people and world around us. Once we’ve ac-

quired what we want, it becomes a *possession*. And from there it becomes an *attachment*. We no longer believe that we can be happy without whatever it is that we're attached to. It has become part of our identity. When our ego, desires, and attachments become part of our identity, it becomes part of the "I," the individual. They have become extensions of our very selves.

If anything were to happen to that which we *I-identify* with, we feel threatened, insecure, depressed, hurt, devastated... The more we *I-identify* with, the greater the chance of our being hurt, disappointed, and unhappy.

The key, then, is to identify with things which bring you happiness, security, peace, love, and harmony with the people and world around you (in other words, positive energy), and to *dis-I-identify* with anything that causes negative energy.

To free your mind you must be able to see yourself and the people and world around you without any ego, desires, or attachments. It requires a new perspective on old ideas.

Doctor, philosopher, and motivational speaker Wayne Dyer illustrates this point well:

“When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” ^[5]

Think outside of the box, without boundaries. Question every belief you've ever had, and any new ideas you encounter along the way. Become a freethinker, and evaluate/re-evaluate what you know while putting every thought and idea through certain tests or filters.

What are these filters? That's for you to decide; but first you may need a little more information.

Harmonize Your Mind

Before we can determine which filters to use, it's necessary to acquire certain knowledge which will help determine which filters work best for you. Besides observation and questioning, it's important to understand one basic principle of life: that some things are in our control, and some things are not in our control.

Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher born in A.D. 55, explains this with perfect simplicity and clarity:

“Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: Some things are in our control, and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and can't control that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible.

“Within our control are our opinions, aspirations, desires, and the things that repel us. These are quite rightly our concern, because they are directly subject to our influence. We always have a choice about the contents and character of our inner lives.

“Outside our control, however, are such things as what kind of body we have, whether we're born into wealth or strike it rich, how we're regarded by others, and our status in society. We must remember that these things are externals and are therefore not our concern. Trying to control or change what we can't only results in torment.

“Remember: The things within our control are naturally at our disposal, free from restraint or any hindrance; but those things outside our control are weak, dependent, or determined by the whim and actions of others. Remember, too, that if you think that you have free rein over things that are naturally be-

yond your control, or if you attempt to adopt the affairs of others as your own, your pursuits will be thwarted and you will become a frustrated, anxious, and fault-finding person.”^[6]

What this passage shows us, and we’ll explore more later, is that right thinking is necessary to acquire happiness and freedom. Therefore, knowledge is the key to understanding.

The best way to arrive at knowledge is through a process of *questioning* the people, ideas, and world around you, *comparing* any (or all) available data, *eliminating* any useless or untrue information, and ultimately (if possible) gaining first-hand *experience* of a subject. *Will power* is needed to seek knowledge in the first place and to *implement* any useful knowledge once it is *attained*. The best use of knowledge is to use it to help *understand* the nature of a thing (whatever object you decide upon) and to then use this knowledge to *free yourself* from anything that impedes your *will*. (This works equally for both noble and sinister objectives.) The level of freedom an individual attains correlates directly with the amount of will exerted and knowledge grasped, which then correlates with a person’s overall happiness in life. The more free a person is, the happier they tend to be.

So as you can see, knowledge is the first step towards freedom. If freedom is the goal, one of the most important *questions* we can ask ourselves is, “What forces exist that keep us from being as free as we can be?” The answer to this question falls into one of two categories: internal and external forces. Internal forces are your fears, desires, pride, envy, ego, attitudes, etc. External forces would be the people, (friends, family, associates, government, strangers...) or circumstances in your life.

All internal forces related to emotion or thought are connected to the mind, the most powerful tool at your disposal. Like any tool, it must be used to serve its purpose. When used to the height of its abilities, it becomes sharp as a razor. It’s only when the mind is strong that

it can be used to control emotion and will, and thus achieve its goals with any kind of consistency. When it is weak, it only tends to create turmoil. Before a person can even dream of freedom, they *must* have a strong mind and an iron will. In fact, these must be indomitable. You must have a clear vision of yourself and the people and world around you—not as you *want* them to be, but as they *are*.

So knowledge must be used to help create certain filters which will be useful in determining which thoughts, ideas, and actions are most beneficial to us, and we must have certain goals that we're working towards. Again, what goals you choose are entirely up to you.

The filters are topic-specific questions designed to determine the truth of a subject, especially in relation to your goals, whatever these goals may be.

First, you must decide on a topic. Then, decide which filter or filters you intend to use; you can use as many as you like. After comparing the results of your filter test to your desired goal(s), you can proceed in planting the seed and helping it grow, or casting the seed out of the garden altogether.

Some questions you might ask are:

- Would this make me happy?
- Is this what I really want?
- Will this bring me peace?
- Is this love?
- Does this make for a better and more beautiful world?
- Is this something within my control, or outside my control?
- Is this a logical way to think and live?
- Will this bring me closer to my goals?
- Will this bring positive or negative energy to my life and mind?

Not only do these filters illustrate how helpful these queries can be towards achieving our goals, they show us that we have a *choice* in

what we let into our minds, and how much we let internal and external forces affect us (which was highlighted in the quote shared earlier by Epictetus). Remember, energy flows. Where energy goes, power flows.

When I was eighteen, I left my hometown with my girlfriend at the time and moved to another city. After a few months, my then girlfriend decided that moving wasn't the right decision for her, and packed up and went back home to her parents. I found myself alone in a town in which I knew only one other person.

I was feeling a little down about the whole thing, and then I had this *outside observer* moment; I looked at the situation and saw what the problem was—I was allowing my girlfriend breaking up with me to make me unhappy.

I remember saying to myself, “Why should I give her the *power* to make me unhappy?” This was a shocking, enlightening, *empowering* thought to me. I immediately saw how beneficial this could be to my overall happiness and began to expand on the idea. Not only should I never give any person the power to make me unhappy, but I should never give any outside event or circumstance the power to make me unhappy. This was a life changing realization.

From then on, I knew that I had the *power* to *choose* my own *attitude* in any given *moment*. Outside forces could only affect me if I *chose* to *allow* them to.

Viktor Frankl, writer, philosopher, and prisoner in a Nazi work camp during WWII shows us the power we have each moment in shaping our own thoughts and circumstances, regardless of the situation:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” [7]

This is the power each of us has—to choose our attitude, our response, and our happiness, in any and all circumstances. So you see, happiness is a *choice*.

Abraham Lincoln said:

“I have noticed that most people in this world are about as happy as they have made up their minds to be.” [8]

What’s empowering about this quote is how you can replace the word “happy” with just about any other emotion or attitude and it’s still true!

“I have noticed that most people in this world are about as *anxious* as they have made up their minds to be.”

“I have noticed that most people in this world are about as *peaceful* as they have made up their minds to be.”

What a great and powerful quote!

Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, poet, and lecturer, helps bring this idea full circle when he says:

“Life consists in what a man is thinking of all day.” [9]

That, as you can see, is the long and short of it.

Expand Your Mind

“We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our
thoughts
With our thoughts we make the
world.

“Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws
the cart.

“We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our
thoughts
With our thoughts we make the
world.

“Speak or act with a pure mind
And happiness will follow you
As your shadow, unshakable.”^[10]

- Buddha

Now that we have illustrated the basic principles of why so many people suffer and how to understand, free, and harmonize your mind, it's time to *expand* your mind. Continue to cultivate your garden. Question and explore this amazing world. Search for useful knowledge, helpful habits, and empowering ideas.

If you did only this, I believe that you could easily find some sense of happiness in this world. But there is so much more to explore.

We have explored the *mind*. Yet there are so many questions to be asked, answered, and searched for.

For instance, Where did we come from? Where did the universe come from? Why are we here? And the biggest and most mysterious questions of all: What is the purpose of existence? And what is our purpose as living beings?

Purpose

“As a man who has devoted his whole life to the most clear headed science, to the study of matter, I can tell you as a result of my research about atoms this much: There is no matter as such. All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particle of an atom to vibration and holds this minute solar system of an atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.”^[11]

- Max Planck

To truly know ourselves, we must know more than just our mind. We must know whatever it is that makes us, us. How did we come to exist? How did we acquire consciousness? Is there an intelligence greater than our own? Does God or a Supreme Being exist?

For the record, I don't claim to have all the answers to these questions, but I will share with you my understanding of what existence is, who and what we are, and our purpose for being here.

As I said in the previous section, to gain knowledge of a nonphysical or spiritual aspect of existence, we must approach it in a completely different way than we're accustomed to.

Max Planck, German theoretical physicist and originator of quantum theory, concluded that holding each atom together is a conscious and intelligent force, what he calls the matrix of all matter. The question is, is he right? Is there an intelligent force behind all of existence? Or is it all a random accident?

I've thought about these questions since I was young, and the best way that I've come to illustrate the existence of an intelligent Source behind creation is this: say you have a blank canvas, and in a paint can you have all of the necessary paint colors to make an exact replica of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. And say you had a way to drop all of the paint onto the canvas without any spilling off... How many times will this process need to happen before the *Mona Lisa* is accidentally made? Will it ever happen by accident? What do you think?

My answer is that it will *never* happen. Obviously I have no way to test this theory, but all logic and human reason up to this point indicates that for something like the *Mona Lisa* to be made, it requires some form of *intelligence* to *create* it. And if something as simple(!) as the *Mona Lisa* can't be made by accident, does it really seem logical that the entire universe, in all of its amazing complexity, could have really happened by accident?

I didn't have the words or imagination to express all of this in quite this way when I was an early teenager, but nonetheless, when I looked at the complexity of existence, it seemed to me self-evident that a greater intelligence must be involved.

Where does this Intelligence come from? I don't know. Was it created, or did it always exist? Not sure. Does that change the evidence of an intelligent Being creating and sustaining all of existence? Not at all. Just because we can't answer *all* questions pertaining to existence, it's hard to deny the evidence of intelligence we see every day, right before our eyes.

Throughout the ages, people all across the world, from the beginning of recorded history, have asked these very same questions. Somehow, it seems that the vast majority of them came to the same conclusion, that some intelligent creator-being exists. A Supreme Being. A Universal Mind. God. (To make things easier, I will simply use the word "God" in most cases from this point forward.) On top of that, the ancient religions of the world also independently concluded

that within each of us, making up our true essence, is some energy, soul, or spirit (there are many names), also composed of an intelligent mind beyond that of the regular brain, that makes us, us—that is the very source of our individual consciousness and identity.

But not only did they believe this, some also claimed to have *experienced* God and their souls *first-hand*. Some who claimed to experience this told of the existence of a spiritual realm, that God was eternal, and that our souls were eternal and continued to live even after the death of the body! (Forgive me for not sourcing these statements; I'm trying to give a brief overview, not a comprehensive historical analysis.) Some called it heaven, others called it the inner world(s), but however you slice it, it was accepted in nearly all ancient religions that the spiritual realm was/is a spiritual fact.

Eastern religions, in part or in whole, believed not only in the soul and the spiritual world, but in the reincarnation of souls; that is, after life and death, a soul returns to a new body to continue to learn and grow as a spiritual being, until—eventually—enlightenment is attained and unity with God is complete. Although not all ancient Eastern religions believed in a personal God, nearly all believed in the soul and reincarnation, and they still do to this day.

And it's not just ancient religions that have claimed to have experienced God, their souls, and the spiritual realm. There are many alive today who also make this claim. Though their wording and experiences may not always be the same, a simple internet search reveals that over three quarters of the world's population believes in God and/or has spiritual beliefs.

Although none of this *proves* that God and the spiritual world exist, it must be taken into serious consideration when analyzing the people and world around us. Either all of these people are crazy and delusional, or perhaps there's something to their claims.

As a teenager, questions of this nature intrigued me, and I concluded that the ideas and claims of religion and spirituality warranted clos-

er examination. The more I studied, the more I became convinced that God and the spiritual world do, in fact, exist.

Eventually, I had my own experiences of my soul, God, and the spiritual world. Some of the more intimate details of my spiritual journey I've written about in the past and you'll read later in this book, but for now I'd like to share with you *my* understanding of God, existence, and the spiritual world.

As we talked about in the previous section, and as we know from both spirituality and science, energy is a big part of existence. In fact, both spirituality and science agree that energy comprises *all* of existence; everything is energy in one form or another. My understanding, based on deductive reasoning, circumstantial evidence, and my own spiritual experiences is that all of us, our souls, and the physical world exist and are sustained within the energy and mind of God. This same conclusion is shared by many spiritual people alive today, and has been described with astonishing similarity in some of the most ancient spiritual writings of the past.

So even if everything is energy and everything is part of God, what's the point? Why did God create all of this? Why did God create souls? And if reincarnation is part of existence, what's the reason?

My understanding is that God created souls as a way to express both love and companionship. The way I see it, each of us was given a part of God's spirit or energy (which we call our soul), which will always be ours and will never die or be destroyed. But to make us totally free, we had to start from scratch—each of us a blank slate, if you will; to do it any other way would involve a certain amount of preprogramming, and in that case, we really couldn't be considered free individuals.

So we start from scratch, and we have free will ... but how are we supposed to know who and what we are? How can we learn about energy, God, and the soul? That's where the world of matter comes in.

The physical world was created, again, as a form of expression, but also as a place to learn about God and the soul. How does one learn what soul is? By experiencing the physical (which then helps us to understand and experience the soul). How does one learn what love is? By experiencing both love *and* hate. How can we understand immortality? Through understanding death. One cannot understand the concept of *self* without having some concept of *other*. On and on it goes. More lessons, more experiences—more growth and understanding.

With all that there is to learn, can you imagine learning all that there is to know in one lifetime? How could that ever be possible? And so reincarnation enters the picture.

Through reincarnation, we continue to experience and grow as spiritual beings, each incarnation adding more opportunities to enhance and refine our knowledge, character, mind, and understanding.

To put it another way, the physical world is a school—a classroom—kind of like an educational video game. When a lesson is learned, we move on to the next level, where new challenges and lessons are presented to us.

Within this video game are certain laws and rules designed to help us learn whatever lessons are necessary for our growth. One of these laws is what has become known in spirituality and popular culture today as *karma*. Although there are varying definitions describing what karma is, I describe it as a natural law of energy; the energy we put out eventually returns to us—the Spiritual law of Reciprocity.

So rather than saying God punishes us for something we've done (or rewards us, for that matter), through the Spiritual law of Reciprocity we literally reap what we sow. Perceived rewards or punishments are simply the natural consequences of the positive or negative energy we put out into the world. Think of it as a natural law—like gravity—it's simply a natural element of existence.

I would like to add this, though: I believe that a truly contrite heart can cancel out any negative energy we're naturally meant to receive, as guilt and repentance are themselves a form of energy, like love, peace, and other emotions.

When viewed this way, God, spirituality, and existence—to me, at least—make a lot more sense than traditional religious viewpoints, and I believe that it would be beneficial for many other people as well if they would only have the courage to evaluate their ideas and beliefs without any dogma or preconceived notions on the subject. Unfortunately, most people already have seeds and trees planted in their minds, put there by their culture, family, society, or religion, and have an extremely hard time thinking of God and spirituality in any other terms than they already know.

As I suggested earlier, ask questions. Expand your mind. Take a chance. Don't just take my word for it—do some research, and see what you find out.

As far as reincarnation is concerned, there are many amazing books and videos that suggest that reincarnation is—indeed—true, and have strong circumstantial evidence to back their claims. In fact, I believe that if a person were to spend 20-25 hours researching the subject of reincarnation, they would walk away completely convinced. (And I believe the same could be said for near-death experiences as well.)^[12]

Study various religions and spiritual teachings. Perhaps something you find there will strike a chord within you and you can experience God and your soul first-hand.

One question that I've been asked in the past is, "If God and the soul are real, why hasn't everyone experienced it?" To that I say, "Why is it not everyone has experienced Mt. Rushmore?" Because they haven't gone there! The same is true for spiritual matters—some people have never gone there because they've never opened themselves up to the possibility of it.

As was said earlier, the mind is a conductor; if certain parts are closed, nothing can enter. A well functioning mind is a mind that's open to many possibilities. In fact, if we do—indeed—start as a blank slate, why should *any* possibilities be off limits? How can we be *sure* that a certain thing *isn't* possible? Where would such a concept even come from, especially in regards to spiritual matters?

That's why it's so important to have a free mind. Beliefs that have never been tested through close examination and/or experience are simply *someone else's* theories or experiences! Experience the world for yourself! Don't always rely on someone else's word. And that most certainly includes everything I'm saying in this book! Don't just accept something because your religion, society, or some *authority figure* says to. Do the work yourself! Try to find the truth *experientially*; then you shall *know* without any *doubt* whether something is true or not.

I'll address this topic and other spiritual matters in more depth later in the book, but for now I'd like to tie in what was said in the previous section about mind with what we just talked about with spirituality.

God-centered/Self-centered

“A human being is part of the whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”^[13]

- Albert Einstein

In the previous section, I proposed that God created souls and the physical world as a way to express both love and companionship. For God to express love, love would need to be a characteristic of God’s personality. In fact, according to many religions, mystics, and spiritual people both past and present, love is the characteristic that most defines God—in essence, God *is* love. And the ultimate goal of love is unity, isn’t it? (I’ll get into more specific questions concerning the nature of God later in this book.)

But what is love, really? We’ve heard this word thousands of times before, but have we ever really thought about it as a spiritual concept?

Robert Heinlein, in his science fiction classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*, defines love this way:

“Love is that condition in which the happiness of another is essential to your own.”^[14]

And Sadhguru, Indian mystic, writer, and lecturer states that:

“Love is a process of inclusion. Once I include you as part of me, I will be to you just the way I am to myself.”^[15]

If you look closely, in the quotes by Heinlein, Sadhguru, and Einstein, they each involve the process of including others in ourselves, and sharing ourselves with others. Deep down, at its very core, isn’t that what love is? And unity as well?

So the ultimate purpose of existence is for us to understand what love and unity is and become—ourselves—unified in love with God and all that exists (in God).

As I said in the first section of this book, everything in life is comprised of choices. We can choose a life of love and inclusiveness, what I’ll call a God-centered life, or we can choose to live a life centered only on ourselves and what makes us happy individually, regardless of the effects it has on others (a self-centered life).

To understand this more deeply, take a moment to think of the people you know in your life, of those who are the most self-centered and those who try their best to live a life of love and unity with others. Do those who lead mostly self-centered lives seem happy or unhappy to you? What about those who are always doing things for others, who are forever willing to sacrifice some part of themselves to help someone out or be a friend to a person in need? Of the two, which seem to be living the happier, more fulfilling life?

If you were to use observation and mindfulness to analyze the people and world around you in this way (and the feelings inside of yourself), over time I believe that it would become apparent that a self-centered life more often leads to unhappiness than a life of integrated love and unity with others.

As was illustrated in the first section, that which we *I*-identify with becomes part of the “I.” What we identify with the most is what will grow, is what we will *become*.

Meister Eckhart, German theologian, philosopher, and mystic, illustrates this point well when he says:

“The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is; and accordingly, its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and a God seed into God.” [16]

Remember, where our focus goes, energy flows. As Ralph Waldo Emerson illustrated earlier, we become what we do and think about the most each day. What we put our time and energy into will—indeed—bring forth fruits of the same nature.

Mother Teresa, Catholic nun and missionary, has this to say about how we spend our time:

“Everybody today seems to be in such a terrible rush, anxious for greater developments and greater riches and so on, so that children have very little time for their parents. Parents have very little time for each other, and in the home begins the disruption of the peace of the world.”^[17]

Speaking of time and mindfulness another way, Brother Lawrence, Catholic monk and author of *The Practice of the Presence of God*, shares this insightful meditation:

“The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.”^[18]

Such is the mindfulness one can possess when they have mastered their inner-will and emotions and choose to live a God-centered life.

In the following sections, I’ll share more regarding the spiritual aspects of existence; specifically, I’ll describe my own spiritual journey in the hopes that a deeper understanding of my experiences and thought processes can shed light on how I’ve come to see God and existence, and can further enhance your understanding of *mind, purpose, and truth*.

My Story

When I was fifteen, my dad gave me a Bible. He said it was with “no strings attached,” that every person should have a Bible, and whether I read it or not was entirely up to me. He said that if I decided to read it, that I should start with the Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And that was it. He said he’d never bring it up again unless I wanted to talk about it.

Now I had gone to church my whole life; I was raised Catholic, so the idea of God was nothing new to me. What I did know about God I’d picked up through Sunday school and church, and through conversations with family and friends, but this knowledge was quite limited, and deep down I didn’t really feel like I *knew* God. I felt that God existed, but that was about it.

So I decided to explore this strange new book, curious but uncertain as to what I might find. Immediately, I noticed that, unlike previous Bibles I’d looked at, this one was in plain, everyday English, something called the “New Living Translation.” The name of the Bible was the *TouchPoint Bible* ^[19], and aside from its easy-to-read language, it had other helpful insights as well, such as a “help finder” in the back and columns on the sides of the pages concerning a number of different topics. Quotes were highlighted throughout, and Jesus’ words were printed in red, making them stick out from the rest of the text.

I started, as my dad suggested, with the Gospel of Matthew. I read about the birth of Jesus, the preaching of John the Baptist in the wilderness, Jesus’ temptation in the desert, and then I came to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) ... What I read there changed my life forever.

I was only fifteen, but somehow I knew that within those handful of paragraphs was the way life was supposed to be. What Jesus described made so much sense to me. The kind of love he talked about, I knew, was the kind of love everyone should have. And from that moment forward, it was the kind of love I knew I wanted to have.

Still, many things didn't make sense to me. As I continued reading the Gospels, I was confused by some of the miracles and the contradicting stories. For the most part, I blocked out what I didn't understand and concentrated more on what did make sense to me. What made sense to me more than anything was the "Golden Rule:"

"Do to others what you would like them to do to you."

—Matthew 7:12

If everyone were to treat others as they wanted to be treated, I figured, the world would be a much better place. And the idea that if we tried to live like this regardless of how anyone else acted seemed to me like the right way to live.

This, then, became the religious foundation of my life. It became my way of judging whether I was doing good or bad in the world. In anything I did, I would always try to ask myself if what I was doing was the way I would want it done to me.

It soon became clear to me that when I followed this way of living, I felt good, and when I didn't, I felt bad. Also evident was the fact that the more I followed the Golden Rule with others, the more it seemed they would follow it with me. This was a powerful realization because it showed me that what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount was true; others will treat you as you treat them.

The impact of this affected my entire life. Before long, the Golden Rule became an ingrained part of my conscience and the judge of my actions. It brought me joy and understanding, and it made me feel closer to God.

Over time, I began to feel God more and more in my life. I honestly can't tell you when I realized that what I was feeling was God. It wasn't something I ever thought about. There was no defining moment, just a gradual awareness of God's presence that grew as time went on.

To an extent, I had always felt God in my life, even as a child. Growing up in a religious background I'm sure had something to do with this, but more than anything, there had always been those moments in life where something truly profound would happen, and I knew without being told that what was happening was beyond coincidence. These moments always had a great impact on my life because they showed me that there was "something else" out there, something quite real and alive, powerful and present.

It wasn't until I began reading the Bible that I began to feel God in my life on a daily basis. Exactly what I mean by this is hard to explain. It's been said by many that when you try to share with people what it's like to experience God that it can't be fully translated into words. It's quite literally an *experience*, something uniquely personal and subjective to the person experiencing it; one can describe it, but it will never be able to take the place of the experience itself.

Nonetheless, the first major highlight in my spiritual journey happened on a night as I lay in bed reading the Bible. Feeling inspired, I began to write a prayer to God on a piece of paper. I call it a prayer, but it was more like a "mission statement," expressing my faith and trust in God and asking for guidance in my life.

Then, as I lay there, something happened to me, something I had never felt before. I was "in-spirit"—in God. A wave of euphoria flooded over me, and in that moment I seemed to realize the full extent of God's love.

It was a powerful feeling, so deep and penetrating that it was as if the center of my being had been touched and the peace and joy of God was all that I could feel. It was a feeling of love so magnificent and consuming that I felt love for all the world and everything in it, an ecstasy so

unifying that I felt that I was part of everything and everything was part of me, and together we were one in God.

I knew then that the love of God was the greatest thing in the world, and to share this love the greatest thing that I could do. From that moment on, I knew that I could trust in God's love.

After that experience, life went on as before, yet it was also different. I felt as if God were a constant companion, always with me, always loving. When I did something that I knew to be wrong, it hurt even more because I knew that what I was doing was not the way of God. Deep down I knew that no matter what I did, God would still love me, and I always felt God's forgiveness any time I asked for it, but inside I still knew that what I had done was wrong, and for however long or short that time was, during those moments I felt miserable, knowing that I had separated myself from God's ways.

Reading the Bible began to change for me during this time as well. I realized that what Jesus was trying to say to people was the same thing that I had experienced with God myself. He called his message the "Good News," and though it remained unclear to me exactly what that meant for some time, I knew that he was trying to tell people about God's love.

During this time, I really didn't talk about God to too many people. I was still learning, and felt it best to continue learning. I knew that the first thing I needed to do was to finish reading the Bible. So after reading the Gospels one more time, I moved on.

I started with the Old Testament, beginning with *Genesis*. Some of the stories seemed pretty fantastic. Some were strange, others unbelievable. But believability aside, what bothered me the most about the Old Testament was God. God seemed angry and mean, and at times, downright evil, and it was hard for me to comprehend. This was not at all like the God I had come to know in the short time since I began reading

the Gospels, and not at all like the God I'd come to experience in my own life. Still, I continued reading, confused but trying to make sense of it all.

When I eventually finished reading the Old Testament, I decided to read the rest of the New Testament, starting with Acts. This, too, was confusing at times, but I liked it better than the Old Testament.

What I noticed in both was a need for God's anger to be appeased with some sort of sacrifice. This seemed to contradict what Jesus said about God, telling us to forgive our enemies and do good to those who harm us.

Also foreign to me was the idea that Jesus was not only the "Son of God," but was also "God." This was not at all how I had come to understand it when reading the Gospels for the first time, and it seemed strange to me to think of Jesus this way. Yet some of the New Testament was helpful, a continuation of what Jesus taught and central to a message of love.

Having read all of the Bible, I began at this point to talk about God with other people. I didn't stop reading the Bible at this time, though I mainly concentrated on the Four Gospels, reading a page or two a day until I finished all four and then starting over again.

Discussing the Bible with people brought with it many mixed opinions. On the one hand were those who felt as I did, confused by some things but finding relevance in the Gospels, while on the other hand were those who seemed to concentrate more on "The Cross" and "The Blood of Christ." While both viewpoints were interesting, it was hard for me to accept that a God so full of love and grace would require a blood sacrifice as a way of atoning for the sins of mankind. In my view, that kind of atonement was neither loving nor forgiving. It required that someone had to pay, and in that case, couldn't really be considered forgiveness at all. It resembled more of an "eye for an eye" philosophy to me than it did a "turn the other cheek" philosophy.

But the most important thing I learned from hearing other people's ideas about God was that what we believe makes a difference in how we live and think in relation to God and those around us. It showed me that a model of a loving God was more able to produce loving people, full of charity and grace, while a model of a vindictive God brought with it, in many ways, more harm than good, producing people of a more harsh and sometimes unforgiving and unaccepting nature.

It was clear to me then that in order for me to grow and move forward on a spiritual level, I would need to leave behind any kind of thinking that portrayed God in an unloving manner. The God I had come to know was full of love, mercy, and understanding. Anything that portrayed God differently did so contrary to my own experience. What I needed then, I knew, was to let go of dogma and tradition and explore love for myself.

God, I had faith, would lead me to the truth.

And so I began a journey in search of experiences similar to my own; not for validation, but for accounts of those who could say what they experienced better than I could. What I knew to be true was hard to express in words. Words couldn't capture what I had experienced with God that special, beautiful day and the many days since, and I now know that they never will. Words are imperfect, but they're the best tools available to us to try to share what we feel.

The path I followed was random, but it was also more than that. At times it felt as if I were being guided by the Spirit of God. I was drawn to writers who were free-thinkers, who told it how it was regardless of what anyone else thought of them. Coming from a family of free-thinkers, I've never been afraid to form my own conclusions on things. To follow the spirit within is not a sin in my eyes; that's the part of us that's most connected with God. Where else would one look to find the truth ... to be unified with God?

I was happy to learn that there were many people who had experiences similar to my own. Although I didn't agree with everything I read, I always tried my best to keep an open mind and learn as much as I could. Slowly, over time, I began to see that what I had experienced with God had been experienced countless times throughout history. People, I learned, had been trying to describe what they felt to be true for thousands of years, and I was shocked to see how similar even some of the oldest accounts were to my own.

Growing up as a Christian, I was even more surprised to see how rich other faiths were in their descriptions. I had always been taught that Jesus was the "only way" to God. Without the testimony of Jesus, it's quite possible that I never would have come to know God myself, and for that I am eternally grateful, but I'm just as grateful to God for showing me the many other beautiful horizons. It wasn't easy letting go of some of my dogmatic beliefs, but I put my faith in God. I stepped into the river of spirit and trusted where it was going.

My experience of God was one thing; I understood it, but I still could not articulate it. I knew I was getting closer. After all, every river eventually leads to an ocean.

Eventually I came to learn that God can be found in many places. Love has no religion, and no religion can have a monopoly on God. God can't be limited to a religion or a church, but can be found in the hearts of anyone who has the love of God inside of them and a never ending desire to share that love with everyone else.

During my explorations of love, I studied many religions and many bibles, and read books on a wide range of religious beliefs. There are many similarities in the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and many others, with much to be gained from all of them. Although these religions have their differences, it's clear that at the core of each of them is a message of love.

So I thought to myself, “What’s the problem here? Why is there still so much hatred and separation in the world?”

The problem, I came to realize, is that most religions are all too willing to define the limits of God’s love. You’re either saved or not saved, righteous or unrighteous, Jew or Gentile, sinner or saint. But is this really the way God sees things? Can a being of perfect love ever *not* love?

To me, the answer is no. If it were “yes,” then it wouldn’t be perfect love at all, it would be something else. And so I thought, “That’s it! Perfect love! God’s love is perfect! It has no limits!”

Although I already knew this to be true and I had seen the words “perfect love” together many times, I had never thought about it as a spiritual concept before. It described God more completely than any other way I had come across. It was clear to me then that this was the “Good News” Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. This was the kind of love that made so much sense to me as a teenager. This was the kind of love I had experienced from God.

Perfect love, I realized, is the only thing that can bring us together, whether it’s in our relationship with God or our relationships with those around us. That’s the ultimate function of love anyways, isn’t it ... to bring about unity? Deep down, isn’t that what we all want in life, to love and be loved, and through this sharing, find peace, joy, and unity? In my experience, that’s what God wants, too.

That’s why the idea of an eternal hell is a foreign concept to me now. For hell to exist, it would mean that God would have to say, “I’m sorry ... it’s too late. You had your chance. We can never be together now.” A God of perfect love would never do that. Hell would show a limitation to God’s love.

Although we’re all free to choose our own paths in life, I believe that no matter how long it takes, the power of love and God will unify even the most resistant soul, until all are One.

My experiences of God have been of a love so perfect it's hard to describe. I know that we're imperfect beings, and I know that it's impossible to fully describe our feelings and experiences, but I will never believe that it's impossible to know God. What God wants us to know we can know without any limits, our own imperfections aside. Our minds and our bodies may be imperfect, they may cease and fade away, but our souls can understand what our minds cannot.

I believe that everyone and anyone can know God. It's this belief that has allowed my relationship with God to flourish and prosper, and open my eyes and heart to the love of God.

Over the years, my relationship with God has given me the kind of trust to never be afraid to search for answers wherever I may find them. I've always believed that, no matter what, God will lead me to the truth.

This doesn't mean that answers always come instantaneously. It can be different for different people. Sometimes it's a process where one thing must be learned before another can be understood, or maybe we're not ready for certain lessons or we've closed our minds to the lessons at hand. Whatever the case may be, always trust in God for guidance. Be willing to think about things for yourself and follow the feelings of your own heart. Let God's love guide the way.

When dealing with others, we must always try to understand that we're all at different points in our relationship with God. This means that we should always try to be patient and tolerant with each other, ready to help and be helped, and never try to force our thoughts or ideas on someone else.

It's important to remember that each person has their own relationship with God, and therefore, we should give them whatever freedom they need in finding their own way, whatever way that may be. We may, at times, be at different points in the journey, but we're all going to the same place, so be patient ... it'll all work out.

My journey has taken me to quite a few special places since I began. I've shared much with people and they've shared much with me. I've been fortunate to learn from many people in my life, including my family, friends, strangers, and even those who weren't so friendly ... not to mention nature, and most of all God. Not a second goes by that I don't try my best to appreciate all of the loved ones in my life who've shared and sacrificed for me, and with me, throughout the years. I love you all and pray that you grow closer to God and everyone around you for as long as you live.

The Truth As I See It:

A Summary of Beliefs

God is spirit. Your true life is spirit as well. Therefore, live for things which will develop your spirit and bring you closer to God and those around you.

Seek God. Trust in God and seek communion. Think about, study, and understand God's ways. Transform yourself into a God-like being and share yourself and your experiences of God with others. This is the spiritual life.

Your true mind is part of your spirit. It is the means by which we are alive in God. Although in this world we have our constraints, the spiritual mind is free.

To control and come in harmony with your mind is to know ultimate freedom. It is the kind of freedom which will remove all barriers in the way to intimacy with God and those around you.

Actions are the fruit of the mind. They are the reflections of our true selves and the mechanisms by which others will relate to us.

In your dealings with those around you, show grace, and know that grace is greater than justice. Justice is—at times—necessary, but not when it causes separation. Therefore, forgive those who have wronged you. This is the way of love. To not forgive is to act counter to unity. Being imperfect yourself, remember to love all as God loves them, and

be lenient in your dealings with others, as you would want them to be with you.

Seek not to harm another; emotionally, physically, or spiritually. Emotional and spiritual violence can leave scars that do more damage than physical ones.

To physically harm another cannot be considered love. Know that true love treats others good regardless of how they are treated. Hate feeds off of hate and causes separation. To love a person that hates you is to wake them up to their true selves.

Remember that life in God is spiritual and that even the death of the body is not the end of life. Therefore, love everyone, and let your light shine out for the world to see. Let it shine brightly, until all the darkness is gone. Defend yourself with love, and no matter what happens, you will be with God.

Perfect love is the absence of selfish desire. It embraces where selfishness pushes away. It thinks about what's best for the whole and not just for itself.

Perfect love is unconditional. It loves no matter what, seeing the worth of every soul regardless of how they are.

Perfect love doesn't discriminate. It thinks of how it can bring joy to that which it encounters. It thinks of how it can share itself with everything else.

To practice perfect love is to bring about the evolution of your soul. Where once you held a grudge, you forgive instead. Where once you were jealous of others, you're now content with what you have. Where

once there was disappointment, understanding takes its place. Where once you demanded your own way, you're now willing to sacrifice for the sake of another. Where once you thought only of yourself, you're now conscious of the needs of others. Where you once took things for granted, you're now appreciative of what you have. Where once there was hatred and separation, there now is love and togetherness.

Revenge, hatred, selfishness, dominance, greed ... these are what destroy our souls and make unity an impossibility.

When trying to understand perfect love, one can look for any of these indicators, just to name a few:

Is what you're doing of benefit to yourself alone, or does it benefit God's plan as well?

Is what you're doing bringing you closer to God and those around you, or does it separate you from the two?

Is what you're doing loving and beneficial to everyone, or is it harmful or injurious?

When we act selfishly, it inspires selfishness, and keeps us separated from God and those around us. But when we act lovingly, it inspires love, and unifies us with God and those around us. We should always try to act in a way that inspires love in those around us; toward our family, our friends, and as hard as it may be, our enemies as well.

To act hateful towards an enemy only makes their hateful feeling stronger. It justifies—in their minds—their reason for hating you in the first place. Love, on the other hand, diminishes the hateful feeling, and forces the one with the hatred to reevaluate their feelings toward you

and their feelings inside of themselves; until eventually, you're no longer enemies but friends.

In striving to encounter God in your daily life, find things that bring you closer to God and those around you and use your God-given-gifts to help others to do the same. Do your best to love everyone you meet, seeing them as they truly are, a beautiful and glorious part of God, and not as they sometimes seem to be. Be compassionate, full of grace and understanding, and forgive those who wrong you. Remember the grace that's been shown to you at times and do the same, so that through your love, you may be friends.

Be forever thankful for the people in your life. Cherish each relationship with love and gratitude. Seek to bring joy to those around you, for the joy you give will return to you in happiness. Be willing, when needed, to sacrifice your own desires for the good of another. This is true love and the sign of a God-filled heart.

And lastly, always seek to perfect the love within yourself, knowing that as your love increases, so does your joy, and through this joy, you may grow ever closer to God and those around you.

Living a Spiritual Life

Belief

I believe that anyone can know God. Not just a select few or the “chosen,” the rich, the poor, or the learned. Anyone.

That being said, we are all very different. Each of us is special and unique, and I believe that there are many ways in which a person can come to know God. But I also believe that with these many ways there are some constants which are always present, such as love, peace, unity, appreciation, honesty, forgiveness, non-violence, and so on.

To any honest, truth-seeking person, my message is this: You can know God. You can know the truth. If only you put your mind and spirit in a state that is receptive to the possibility of it, God will do the rest. Take not only my testimony, but the testimony of the peoples of ages past. Take the testimony of your own life, the flashes of God and spirit you may at times have felt, and open yourself up to it. Open your spirit to God.

Soul

I believe in the soul. My basis for this is through my experiences with God. As God is somehow able to communicate and reveal things to me without need of a physical body, and I’m able to receive these revelations without the use of any mental deduction or brain power (*the very definition of revelation*), the part of me which is able to understand this I call *spirit* or *soul*.

The soul, in my experience, isn’t bound by the same limitations as the body. Physical things have physical laws, but the spirit is something

altogether different. Though mental deduction is an important part and contributing factor in understanding our relationship with God, revelation has proven (to me at least) to be the most enlightening means of insight, with the least amount of possible misinterpretation. How it works I can't explain, though for me it isn't necessary; I just accept it for what it is.

To me, the soul can be compared to our conscience (though I'd say our conscience is part of our soul); as our conscience tells us what's right and what's wrong, so the soul does with spiritual matters. The more we try to live in the spirit, the greater in-touch we become with our soul and with God. It is through this that I believe the truth can be revealed to us.

I think all of us can relate to this through the relationships we have in our own lives. The closer we get to people, the more we know about them. I think the same is true with God.

If you're a parent, don't you take delight in sharing all you have with your child? Wouldn't it be the same with God? I believe it brings God much joy to share these things with us.

Love and Unity

Name one thing greater than love. Isn't that what we all want, to love and be loved? To feel a sense of *unity* with those around us and with God?

Therefore, reflect on love and unity. Meditate, think about, and study how you can better share love and unity in your own life. Think about love and unity in the highest sense of the terms. What would it mean to have perfect love? What would it mean to have perfect unity?

Apply these to your life and watch your own joy—and the joy of others—grow around you.

Faith

The beautiful thing about faith is that anyone can have it. You don't need to lift weights or exercise to have it. You don't have to go to college or any kind of special school to have it. You don't need to read certain books or follow a ten-step course to have it. You don't need to stand or sit or kneel, or have any kind of special training whatsoever.

All that is needed is to surrender oneself unto God's loving spirit and *trust* from there on out.

Open Your Heart

Be careful not to limit God, my friends. God often comes in ways unforeseen by our own expectations.

Therefore, open your heart to God. Not just the doors but the windows too, so that nothing remains untouched by God's transforming light.

And may we open our hearts to each other as well, so that we may be One—all of us—one with God in love and unity.

Seeds

Within each of us is the seed of God. Therefore, nurture it, water it, feed it, talk to it. Let the sunlight in and let it grow. Eventually it will grow into a tree whose fruit is both good to eat and to share, with a never ending prosperity of joy and happiness.

Trust/Sacrifice

Trust is a *gift*. It's something we *give* to people, to God. Anything given of oneself takes sacrifice. Trust is no different. To trust, especially in a relationship, we must say that we're willing to give our entire

selves to whoever it may be; God, our family, friends, loved ones—and promise that no matter what it takes, we'll be there for them and try our best to never let them down. This also means trusting in their intention to do the same.

The questions we must ask in any relationship are, “How much are we willing to give?” and “How much will we sacrifice for others?”

Gifts

We all, each of us, have been given certain gifts by God. We must look within ourselves and pray to God to help us develop these gifts so that we may, indeed, become the salt of the earth, enriching the lives of those we encounter, in ways in which we all become closer to God and everyone around us.

Flaws

None of us are perfect. We all have that in us which we are ashamed to look at in the mirror, which we've strived to conquer yet still fallen short.

The beauty comes in trying ... trying each and every day to rid ourselves of that which we despise.

In trying, there is some victory. And every victory adds another brick to the foundation we're trying to build. Until one day, without realizing it, our house is built and we're able to live in peace and joy.

And we'll soon discover that as we work hard to change ourselves, the world around us is changing as well.

Thankfulness

Another word for thankfulness is appreciation, and the best way to show appreciation for any gift is to take care of it. This applies to spiritual gifts as well.

If we let our spiritual gifts fall into ruin through abuse or neglect, then we aren't appreciating how fortunate we are to have them. Therefore, take some time every day to thank God for your many gifts. Use them as often as you can and to the best of your abilities. A spirit of appreciation is always accompanied by a great sense of joy and unity with God and those around you.

Prayer

Prayer can be something very personal or something shared as a group. In either case, clear your mind and let joy and appreciation enter your heart. Speak with God as often as you like, wherever you are, whatever you're doing. About big things or small things, happy things or sad things—whatever it is that brings you joy or trouble. Be open to whatever ways God may answer you. Have patience and faith—God will never let you down.

Anxiety

Try your best not to let anxiety grow too strong in you, whatever the cause. Instead, entrust your hope with God. Ask for guidance and understanding in whatever it is that troubles you. Draw strength in remembering that nothing can separate you from God, not even death. Therefore, never lose your hope or trust in God.

Joy

Some time ago I wrote a quote that says, “There is both good and bad in life; those who are happy concentrate on the good.”

There will always be bad things in the world and things to be negative about, but there is also much joy, much more joy than sorrow. It’s never healthy to concentrate on too much negativity. I’m not saying to bury your head in the sand or close your eyes to suffering, but why dwell on it when there’s so much more to be happy about?

There’s an old saying that “like attracts like.” So if you concentrate too much on the negative, what do you think you’re going to attract?

Goodness

Good people are good, regardless of how anyone else treats them. Their goodness has an effect on the people around them, even those who try to use or abuse or take advantage of them.

Good people must be willing, when necessary, to bear the injustice the world may throw their way and turn it into good, so that through their example, the world can wake up and remember how to live.

Inspiration

Just as we need food every day to stay alive and healthy, so it is with the spiritual aspects of our lives. Therefore, find things that will inspire you in your relationship with God and those around you. Study various religious or spiritual sources and put them into practice; they are your food and drink to keep you strong along your journey.

It is when we are “in-spirit” that we are closest to God and each other and can find the greatest growth, revelation, and joy.

Unbelief

Don't be surprised if some people don't believe you when you talk about God. Some may say that you can't have any knowledge of God because of your age—you may be too young or too old. Others because of your education or lack thereof: "If you didn't go to seminary, how could you know anything about God?" Your lifestyle: "You're not perfect—how can *you* talk about God?" Perceived human limitations: "Humans can't possibly grasp a being as grand as God—how arrogant!" The many different portrayals of God: "Everyone has a different perception of God; therefore, no one can know the truth." Or that we can't possibly know the truth *now*: "We won't find out until we're dead." But believe none of them. Let no one define your limits for you, and let no one define the limits of God. If God wants to share a revelation with you, who is anyone else to say that that's impossible?

Stay true to God, and have a faith without limits.

Tolerance/Forgiveness

Always try to be as understanding as possible with those you meet along your journey. We all have our faults, our negative points, our addictions.

When someone you know or encounter treats you unfairly, try to picture them as someone you love immensely, someone you would never speak to in a harsh or unloving way. Be always ready to forgive. Life is too short and the time we have too precious to waste brooding away at someone.

Forgiveness is a gift that never stops giving. Sometimes we give it, sometimes we get it, but whenever it's present, there's always great joy.

Guidance

In planning for the future, remember that there's nothing wrong with asking God to help guide and lead you along the way. In any situation, anything you do, invite God to be with you. You don't have to go alone.

Effort/Transformation

Living the spiritual life is more than just proclaiming a set of beliefs; it is a declaration of commitment to live as God lives. It takes great effort and hard work—a very transformation in the way we live and think, our philosophies and attitudes, in all things that keep us separated from God and those around us.

Like from a caterpillar to a butterfly, we too can break away from our selfish ways of living and learn to spread our wings and fly.

Love is the air that will keep us afloat.

Closing Thoughts

In seeking God in your life, be true to yourself and never be afraid to seek the truth wherever you may find it. Always follow the leadings of your own spirit and let God's love light the way. If something doesn't make sense to you, pray to God to help show you the truth. Share your joy and your experiences of God with others. Build them up as they will build you up, so that together, with God, we all can experience a true heaven of love and unity.

Simple Reminders for Happy Living

- Don't make excuses
- Know when to be happy
- Live responsibly
- Learn every day
- Pay attention to the world around you
- Be dependable/honor your word
- Consider the big picture, live in the now
- Learn that mistakes can be some of life's greatest teachers
- Cherish the relationships in your life
- Balance work and relaxation
- Be disciplined/have rules for your self
- Learn to avoid placing limits on yourself, God, and others
- Practice creativity (self-expression)/develop hobbies
- Seek to know God's will, but also practice self-reliance
- Strive to grow/become better all the time
- Be patient/understanding with others

- Practice charity
- Think for yourself/continually question your beliefs and the world around you
- Get the proper amount of sleep and relaxation
- Be organized
- Use things until the proper time to replace them/be practical
- Laugh often
- Mind your own business
- Have realistic expectations
- Live simply
- Exercise and eat healthy
- Try not to worry or be over-anxious/trust in God
- Avoid judging others too harshly
- Never be afraid to ask for/give help or advice
- See the world through other people's eyes/practice empathy
- Avoid negativity/be positive
- Seek to know God/your spiritual self
- Try to love unconditionally
- Be appreciative of what you have
- Don't worry too much about what others think of you/be yourself



Quotes

“There is both good and bad in life; those who are happy concentrate on the good.”

“Those who are happy in life realize what makes them unhappy and do the opposite.”

“When it comes to forgiveness, you should always try to forgive others as easily as you forgive yourself.”

“Forgiveness means letting go of the past for the sake of the future.”

“You should forgive others, just as you would want them to forgive you.”

“Love is the key to life. Those who become most acquainted with it find the most joy.”

“To some, love is many different things. To me, it is everything.”

“To love someone is great. To show them that you love them is greater.”

“No heart has ever been broken that couldn’t be cured by love.”

“Hearts will be broken and tears will be cried, but love keeps on growing the harder you try.”

“Love is a tricky investment ... you might not get back what you put in, but it’s always worth the risk.”

“When you’re looking for the strength to carry on, think about what’s most important in your life, and it will help to carry the load.”

“You don’t need to run to accomplish the things you want to do in life ... but be ready just in case.”

“When you give to someone, don’t expect anything in return. And when you are given something, always do your best to return the favor.”

“Charity is an exercise in selflessness.”

“When you live only to please yourself, you’ll rarely please anyone else.”

“It is when we are selfish that we are at our worst.”

“We are at our best when we show compassion, grace, forgiveness, love, and sacrifice. For it is then that we are thinking less of ourselves and more of somebody else.”

“To conquer selfishness is the ultimate test of a human being. To love others as you love yourself is the ultimate measure of a man.”

“Confidence is believing what you already know is true.”

“If you don’t believe in yourself, why should anyone else?”

“Confidence and will-power are like the legs of a table. Without them, everything falls flat.”

“Once in a while you should try to see things through other people’s eyes—and see how the world changes!”

“People are like a box of crayons. Each person is different, and each one adds its own unique color to the big picture.”

“It’s the rainy days that make the sunny days seem so nice.”

“Always keep your eyes open—you might find a new way of looking at things.”

“Not everyone in the world has to think like you do.”

“Even on a rainy day, the sun’s still shining above the clouds.”

“When we lie, it just means that the truth will make us look bad.”

“Sometimes an excuse is just a lie with a conscience.”

“There are only two choices of action in any given situation: the right way and the wrong way. I consider anything in between the wrong way.”

“A person is known by their actions. Whether good or bad, that’s what they’ll be remembered by.”

“If you do what is right, those who respect you will see that your reasons justify your actions.”

“It’s not enough to have a set of beliefs. You must also act in accordance with those beliefs.”

“If someone treats you unkindly and you treat them the same, then you are no better than they.”

“If there’s something you don’t like done to you, you should never do it to someone else, even if they did it first.”

“Don’t worry if other’s treat you unfairly. As long as you treat them with fairness, there will be no fault of your own.”

“Don’t worry about how others treat you. Worry about how you treat them.”

“When you say you’re going to do something, try your best to do it. Not only to maintain a good reputation, but because somebody’s counting on you.”

“Anything that you feel is wrong for someone else to do, you should never do yourself.”

“Life is like a puzzle. We might not always know what we’re putting together, but eventually it all fits into place.”

“To some, a butterfly is one of the most beautiful creatures in the entire world. It is like a flower fluttering through the air. To others, it’s just a caterpillar with wings.”

“So many people go through life trying to knock down doors. I always thought it’d be better to look for the key.”

“A lie is like a spider’s web. When the winds of truth come, it’s bound to get knocked down.”

“Consistence is the mark of a good friend.”

“Excellence requires practice. Practice requires discipline. Discipline requires patience. Patience requires focus. And focus requires a goal to work towards. And in life, there’s never a shortage of goals.”

“Compromise and sacrifice make happy relationships.”

“Like attracts like. So if you always look at the negative, what do you think you’re going to attract?”

“It’s not easy being critical. You can only look at the negative so long before becoming negative yourself.”

“Every time you make a mistake, it’s just one more thing you know not to do next time.”

“Anytime you want to criticize someone for something they’ve done, take a long look at your life and see if you haven’t done the same thing at one point or another—chances are you have.”

“To complain without offering a solution is like trying to fix a water leak by yelling at the water.”

“It’s better to ask for help than to become helpless.”

“The freedom to choose for yourself is the greatest freedom of all.”

“There are three things you can do when confronted with a problem: you can complain about it, you can accept it, or you can fix it and move on. The choice is up to you.”

“Sadness is like a wound to the soul. When we cry, it helps to wash away the pain, and makes it possible for the healing process to begin.”

“It is a rare individual who realizes a good thing before it’s gone.”

“There are two kinds of people in life: those who worry and those who hope. I like to hope.”

“Smile—I’m sure you can think of a reason.”

“A smile not only brightens up your day, it brightens up everyone else’s as well.”

“Anything of real value can never be measured in money.”

“Pride is like a kite that thinks it can fly. It never realizes that it wouldn’t be flying at all if it wasn’t for the wind.”

“Pride is like a butterfly gloating to a caterpillar of its superiority. It never takes into consideration that it was once a caterpillar too.”

“Whether it’s religion or relationships, everything is first built on faith.”

“No one likes to lose. But it’s losing that keeps us humble.”

“A sense of honor is just a highly tuned conscience.”

“If you’re jealous of what others have, it only means you don’t realize how much you have yourself.”

“When you always want more than you have, you’ll never have enough.”

“When you meet someone, try your best not to pre-judge them. Because prejudice is something you decide on ahead of time.”

“Whether it’s religion, politics, or love, force is never the way.”

“Those who lose their temper often times lose more than that.”

“All most people really need in life is to feel wanted or appreciated or worth something. They want to know that there’s somebody out there who accepts them for who they are, and realizes that all they really want to do is love and be loved. And if we would only stop for one second and open our arms to them and embrace them, and let them know how much they mean to us and how important they are in our lives, then this world would be a better place ... a much better place indeed.”

Gospel Thoughts

Introduction: Questions and Filters

What is God? Who is God? Does God exist? What is God's will? Does God love everyone? Does God hate anyone? Is there a hell? Would God really torment someone in hell for eternity? What must one do to be unified with God?

Do you ever ask yourself these questions (or questions like these)? How often? How do you arrive at an answer? Do you think about these questions for yourself, applying reason and logic (including spiritual reason and logic), or do you simply accept what others have said (others being your pastor or parents, church, religion, or society)? What about your own experiences and relationship with God, and the feelings of your own soul—how much do these factor in when trying to answer these questions?

For those of us who believe in God, shouldn't these be the most important questions we can ask ourselves? Shouldn't answering these questions be directly associated with our very reason for existence? If so, how does someone even begin to approach a subject as grand as God?

These are good questions; you might as well know that I don't have all the answers (and if I said that I did, you should probably just throw this book in the trash right now). But I believe that it's in the very exploration of these questions that the answers begin to be revealed to us.

These answers can come in a variety of ways—through meditation and reading, through the sharing and exploration of questions, ideas, and experiences that we and others around us have had, or through the

feelings of our own soul and our own relationship with God; the possibilities are endless.

And when exploring these ideas, I believe two things are of fundamental importance: we must maintain an open mind, and we must trust in God to lead us to the truth. That means questioning both old and new beliefs and experiences, comparing them with all available information, and trying to ascertain their truth and credibility in relation to God and the feelings of our own soul.

It needs to be mentioned, of course, that these questions deal mostly with spiritual matters, and therefore, can't necessarily be proven in any external, material, or scientific way. The truth or validity of any belief or experience must be tested within a person's own conscience or soul. It's in this way that the truth can be known—and not just known—but *experienced*, and through this experience, can become more than just an abstract idea, but a living reality.

This, I believe, is and should be the goal of any true seeker of God; not just to know God through what others have said—what's been passed down through the generations and through religion—but to know God for ourselves, to know God as a friend—as our best friend.

In this way God isn't just some abstract idea that people believe in but have no proof of, but is rather a living reality, who you have experiences and memories with, who you know is real because your spirit and God's have found communion—a spiritual communion—that once experienced, removes any and all doubt.

It's this kind of spiritual relationship that I believe Jesus had (has) with God; and not just Jesus, but countless people from as far back as we can remember—even to the present day. In fact, it's in Jesus' relationship with God that the meaning of his life seems to find its greatest expression, for it shows us that we, too, can have a relationship with God, a deep, life-altering—life-fulfilling—relationship, one that transcends time and space, and isn't bound by mere flesh and blood; a rela-

tionship that's not in some far off future, but is here—now—and always.

Obviously, this is a different portrait of Jesus than we're accustomed to. In many cases, Jesus is viewed as an atoning sacrifice, the "Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world," and saves us from God's wrath. Or, he's viewed as not just a messenger or prophet, but "God in the flesh," "The Son of God," or "God in human form."

It can be argued—quite convincingly, I believe—that Jesus didn't view himself that way at all (and this isn't just my interpretation). Even a moderately thorough investigation into early Christian texts, the Jewish religion, and historical research would raise some questions in the minds of even the most stubborn Christian fundamentalists—if only they would be willing to look at the evidence with a clear and open mind. (Don't just take my word for it; look into it for yourself.)

When viewed this way, the purpose of Jesus takes on a whole new dimension. Rather than being a perfect God-Man—whose perfection (in some people's eyes) we can never hope to approach or attain—Jesus is now a realistic example that all of us can relate to; it shows that anyone—everyone—can follow in his footsteps; that what he did, we can do; that the way he knew God is the same way we can know God; that requires us not to be perfect, but to yearn with all of our being to become perfect—despite our many flaws and setbacks—and through this yearning, grow ever closer to God and those around us.

The many interpretations of Jesus—both now and throughout history—are fraught with debate, and are significant for many reasons, most important of which is how they affect our relationship with God and the world around us. If someone's image of God or Jesus allows room for hatred, judgment, or violence, it follows that they—too—will be hateful, violent, and judgmental. Therefore, it's crucial that we examine—to the best of our abilities—God's true nature, and furthermore, which interpretations of Jesus seem to hold the most amount of truth.

Although there are many religious or spiritual traditions in existence today, for the purpose of this book I'd like to focus mainly on Christianity; specifically, the Christian Gospels. But before I begin, I'd like to pose this question: Is it really God's will when a Muslim extremist declares "jihad" and kills "blasphemers" in the name of Allah?

Most, if not all Christians would say, "Of course not—they misunderstand God," to which the Muslim might respond, "No, no—it is written..." and then quote a verse from the Qur'an...

I think it would be easy for most of us to say that not only are they wrong—that God doesn't desire us to go on "Holy wars"—but if it's really written in their scriptures, than their scriptures must also be wrong; God would never want us to kill each other because someone blasphemed the name of God or a prophet.

But what would happen if that same focus was turned inward, on say—the Christian Gospels or the Old Testament? Would we feel the same way?

That's the focus of this book. My aim is to raise questions concerning conflicting teachings within the four Gospels, with the intention of forcing us to decide which teachings are a true representation of the mind, character, and will of God—and which are not. Although I will give *my* answers to these questions, the important thing will be for you—the reader—to ask these questions to yourself ... to ponder them in your private meditations ... to search for the feeling in your own soul and your own relationship with God and see what you come up with.

It should be noted at this point that I'm not much concerned with topics like the virgin birth or the Resurrection, or not in the traditional sense, rather. To believe or not believe in these "displays of God's power" does virtually nothing to make a person better or worse; they're simply beliefs with no moral significance, and lack the power to transform a person's soul or shape their spirit towards a more godly image. (I'll touch on this more later.)

Rather, it's apparent when reading the Gospels that Jesus' main focus was always on our relationships; specifically, our relationship with God and our relationships with those around us—with unification as the ultimate goal.

This is demonstrated most clearly in Mark 12:30-31. In this passage, Jesus is asked by a teacher of religious law what, in his opinion, is the most important commandment, to which Jesus responds:

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.”

To which he adds:

“A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

But what does that mean? What *kind* of love? The best answer to that, I believe, can be found in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount has been described by some as the “fillet” of the Gospels...quite possibly the most important set of teachings in Christianity. As Leo Tolstoy—author of such classics as *War and Peace* ^[20] and *Anna Karenina* ^[21], as well as spiritual classics such as *The Kingdom of God is Within You* ^[22]—points out, nearly all of the teachings in the four Gospels have their roots in the Old Testament, and were really nothing new. The Sermon on the Mount—on the other hand—is an entirely unique set of teachings. Tolstoy concludes, then, that the Sermon on the Mount should be held as the pinnacle of Christian thinking, elevated by the fact that within the teachings can be found a sort of evolution or fulfillment of the Old Testament law—a completely new understanding of God—which, when examined, reveals that it's only through perfect, unconditional love that complete unification is truly possible.

It's for this reason that I'd like to reproduce Chapter 5 of the Sermon on the Mount in its entirety; this will give us valuable insight when analyzing other scriptures as we move along in the book.

Matthew 5—The Sermon on the Mount

THE BEATITUDES

³ "God blesses those who realize their need for him,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.

⁴ God blesses those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

⁵ God blesses those who are gentle and lowly,
for the whole earth will belong to them.

⁶ God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice,
for they will receive it in full.

⁷ God blesses those who are merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

⁸ God blesses those whose hearts are pure,
for they will see God.

⁹ God blesses those who work for peace,
for they will be called the children of God.

¹⁰ God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

¹¹ "God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers.¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted, too.

TEACHING ABOUT SALT AND LIGHT

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it useful again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. ¹⁵ Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

TEACHING ABOUT THE LAW

¹⁷ "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I assure you, until heaven and earth disappear, even the smallest detail of God's law will remain until its purpose is achieved. ¹⁹ So if you break the smallest commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

²⁰ "But I warn you—unless you obey God better than the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees do, you can't enter the Kingdom of Heaven at all!

TEACHING ABOUT ANGER

²¹ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.'²² But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you say to your friend, 'You Idiot,' you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

²³ "So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you,²⁴ leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your enemy before it is too late and you are dragged into court, handed over to an officer, and thrown in jail.²⁶ I assure you that you won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

TEACHING ABOUT ADULTERY

²⁷ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'You must not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

TEACHING ABOUT DIVORCE

³¹ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a letter of divorce.'³² But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

TEACHING ABOUT VOWS

³³ "Again, you have also heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you have

made to the LORD.³⁴ But I say, don't make any vows! If you say, 'By heaven!' it is a sacred vow because heaven is God's throne.³⁵ And if you say, 'By the earth!' it is a sacred vow because the earth is his footstool. And don't swear, 'By Jerusalem!' for Jerusalem is the city of the great King.³⁶ Don't even swear, 'By my head!' for you can't turn one hair white or black.³⁷ Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.

TEACHING ABOUT REVENGE

³⁸ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.'³⁹ But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too.⁴⁰ If you are ordered to court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too.⁴¹ If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.⁴² Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

TEACHING ABOUT LOVE FOR ENEMIES

⁴³ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy.⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who persecute you!⁴⁵ In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust, too.⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much.⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you dif-

ferent from anyone else? Even pagans do that.⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

When I was introduced to the Sermon on the Mount as a teenager, it struck a chord within me. I *felt* something that I had only had glimpses of before, and didn't even know was real. I felt my *soul*.

This was a life-changing experience for me; it completely altered how I viewed God and the world around me. Sometime after that I had an amazing spiritual experience with God that proved to me that God and the soul were real. (See *My Story*.) I wasn't looking for these experiences ... I didn't even know they were possible; I just looked at the world around me and realized there must be something more to it than random cells and atoms combining to make this amazingly complex universe. And in reading Jesus' words and the feelings that awoke within me, I believed that God must be real, and faith then led to experience.

After reading the Sermon on the Mount and feeling God's love, my soul, and a sense of unity with all that's part of God, I thought deeply about what I was reading in the Bible and how it related to God. On top of that, I compared what I read with my own thoughts and experiences to see how, or if, they were the same. I tried to do this with everything I encountered, letting the feelings within my own soul and my relationship with God test what was right and what was wrong.

Almost everything in the Sermon on the Mount feels right to me; it displays a perfect, unconditional love, and describes God's love the same way. So it felt natural to me that if God's love is perfect, my love needs to be perfect as well (or at least as perfect as I can make it), for it's in this way that we become truly unified. Furthermore, it followed that if God's love is perfect and unconditional, so must be God's forgiveness and grace; so must be God's understanding, tolerance, charity,

patience—and all other good and beautiful aspects of God’s personality and character.

The Sermon on the Mount portrays God as feeling that love towards us regardless of what we do—that we can never be separated from God’s love, and can only feel that we are when we act in a way that’s contrary to God, through selfish thoughts or behavior. That’s why I don’t believe in an eternal hell; it would show a limit to God’s love, as if God was saying, “I’m sorry ... you had your chance. My love only goes so far. You’ve reached your limit. We can never be together now.” I simply can’t reconcile that with what it says in the Sermon on the Mount and with the feelings and experiences of my own soul.

Eventually, I developed my own system to help decipher what I thought was of God and what wasn’t. I call these my “spiritual filters.” These are filters that I apply to any thought or action in daily life, such as, “Would ____ be considered love?” or “Could I consider ____ perfect forgiveness?” It works on small topics, where something like the Golden Rule (Matthew 5:12) might suffice, or in more complex situations, such as how I might feel about abortion, the death penalty, or war.

Here’s an example of how it works. (We’ll use abortion as the topic.) First, I need to figure out which filter or filters I’m going to use. For instance, I might use love, life, peace, and beauty. (You can add as many as you like. It’s also helpful to ask if your results would make for a healthy spirituality and a beautiful world.) Then you just run through the list.

So the first filter is love. Is abortion love? Well, I’ll have to say no; you don’t usually kill that which you love. Is it life? Actually, it’s the exact opposite of life—it’s death. Is it peace? There’s nothing peaceful about an abortion. Is it beautiful? I can’t imagine even one person who would consider abortion beautiful.

So clearly, if abortion doesn’t pass through the filters, it can’t possibly make for a healthy spirituality or a beautiful world.

What about the death sentence—does that pass the test? How about war or violence—or even self-defense? Does it achieve the ultimate goal of unification with God and the people and world around us? Could any of these actions really be described as perfect, unconditional love?

Another simple test is the age-old question of, “What would Jesus do?” Would Jesus go to war? Would Jesus support the death-penalty? Would Jesus hurt anyone—for any reason—even in self-defense? I’m sure you get the point.

These filters can also be used when trying to determine the truth of any religious or spiritual teaching as well, which brings us to the object of this book.

In the following pages, I’ll highlight select Gospel quotations covering various topics, and beneath each quote I’ll provide my thoughts concerning that particular topic.

An argument can be made that some of the teachings in the Gospels were meant to be allegories of a sort; if so, it would give new meaning to some of the more unexplainable or (dare I say) unbelievable stories. See what you think.

It’s my opinion that any good or useful writing should inspire the person reading it to be engaged intellectually with the material they’re reading; whether they agree or not is another matter. Hopefully I’ll give you ample food for thought. If you agree—great! If not, hopefully it will help you to formulate your own thoughts or feelings on the subject.

Note to reader: Since there are many stories that repeat themselves in the Gospels (sometimes in slight variation), I’ll use only one instance of each story. Enjoy.

WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT

Matthew 22:34—40

³⁴But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees with his reply, they thought up a fresh question of their own to ask him. ³⁵One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: ³⁶"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"

³⁷Jesus replied, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

It is interesting to note that nearly everything Jesus taught can be put into one of two categories: our relationship with God or our relationships with those around us. There is nothing more important than these.

A HUMAN POINT OF VIEW

Matthew 16:21—23

²¹From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that he had to go to Jerusalem, and he told them what would happen to him there. He would suffer at the hands of the leaders and the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, and he would be raised on the third day.

²²But Peter took him aside and corrected him. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!"

²³Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, and not from God's."

We should always try to see things from God's point of view. Yet there are some (many?) who say that it's impossible to do so, that human beings are incapable of even beginning to grasp a being as grand as God. But that's letting someone else define God's limitations. What God wants us to know, we can know—without any measure or limit. We must be open and receptive to it.

TEACHING ABOUT DIVORCE

Matthew 5:31-32

³¹ "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a letter of divorce.'³² But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

It would seem this passage got lost in translation. A more accurate translation would be Mark 10:11-12.

¹¹ "Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. ¹² And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery."

I'd like to note, however, that I believe God's understanding and compassion would forgive anyone who divorces because they're part of an unhappy or toxic relationship—especially if doing so would protect any children involved. Vows, of course, are important, but sometimes

people change in ways unforeseeable at the beginning of a relationship. The best we can do is seek God's will and go from there.

THE FAITH OF A GENTILE WOMAN

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon.²² A Gentile woman who lived there came to him, pleading, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter has a demon in her, and it is severely tormenting her."

²³ But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. "Tell her to leave," they said. "She is bothering us with all her begging."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to the woman, "I was sent only to help the people of Israel—God's lost sheep—not the gentiles"

²⁵ But she came and worshiped him and pleaded again, "Lord, help me!"

²⁶ "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs," he said.

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even dogs are permitted to eat crumbs that fall beneath their masters' table."

²⁸ "Woman," Jesus said to her, "your faith is great. Your request is granted." And her daughter was instantly healed.

I find it completely unrealistic that God would make distinctions between "Jew" and "Gentile." (This extends to the idea of "God's chosen people—Israel.") If God's love is unconditional, than to say that someone has to be "Jewish" or "Christian" to be loved by God is utterly ridiculous, and a gross misrepresentation of God.

CORRECTING ANOTHER BELIEVER

Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.¹⁶ But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses.¹⁷ If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. If the church decides you are right, but the other person won't accept it, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector.

¹⁸ "I tell you the truth, whatever you forbid on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. ¹⁹ "I also tell you this: If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you.²⁰ For where two or three gather together in my name, I am there among them."

To "treat a person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector" completely contradicts what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, to love our enemies (in this case, a "fellow believer"), and do good to those who harm us.

I realize that—at times—especially during a conflict or immediately afterwards, each party may need some time to heal or come to terms with their emotions. But I think the sooner we make amends, the happier we will be, and the closer we'll walk with God.

PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING DEBTOR

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"

²² "No," Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!"

²³ "For this reason the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him.²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars.²⁵ He couldn't pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.²⁶ But the man fell down before the king and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.'²⁷ Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

²⁸ "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.²⁹ His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient and I will pay it,' he pleaded.³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full.

³¹ "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened.³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me.'³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid the last penny.

³⁵ "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."

Clearly the man in the story is a hypocrite for the way he treated the servant, but then wouldn't God also be one if we were refused forgiveness because we refused to forgive someone who wronged us? That would be a conflict of principles—the very definition of a hypocrite!

GOD'S LOVE

Matthew 7:7—11

⁷"Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And the door is opened to everyone who knocks.

⁹"You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? ¹⁰Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! ¹¹So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.

In this passage, Jesus compares God's love with that of a loving parent, patiently waiting for us to knock on the door and step inside. This is the "Good News" (gospel) about God; that God loves us, and wants to share that love with us.

One thing I'd like to add ... We don't have to knock on the door; the door is already open.

WHERE ARE YOUR ACCUSERS?

John 8:1—11

¹Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, ²but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. ³As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and Pharisees brought a woman they had caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

⁴"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. ⁵The Law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

⁶They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. ⁷They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones!" ⁸Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

⁹When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. ¹⁰Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

¹¹"No, Lord," she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Can you imagine a society where they would stone a woman for cheating on her husband? It seems barbaric today (though some parts of the world still do it)—yet in Jesus' time, it was the law. For Jesus to forgive a woman under those circumstances showed a kind of love that was far removed from the religious structure of the day. To simply for-

give someone was a foreign concept to the people of Israel; they thought that without *punishment* there could be no *justice*. But what they didn't understand is that mercy is greater than justice. With mercy, an injustice is forgiven out of love.

This passage is a reminder that forgiveness is one of the most important lessons that can be learned from Jesus' teachings.

USING THE NAME OF JESUS

Mark 9:38—40

³⁸John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he isn't one of our group."

³⁹"Don't stop him!" Jesus said. "No one who performs miracles in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me.

⁴⁰Anyone who is not against us is for us."

While there are many religions and beliefs in the world, it's important that we always respect each other's views, even if we disagree with them. That doesn't mean we have to accept their views, but we need to accept that each person's free to follow God (or not follow God) in whatever way they choose.

However, not all views are equal (as can be seen in this book). Just as Jesus was willing to question the beliefs of his day, we too must be willing to speak up when something doesn't feel right to us—to challenge the status quo. It also means never being afraid to let others challenge our beliefs when the opportunity presents itself.

As I hope this book demonstrates, it's essential to our spiritual health and progress to question our experiences and beliefs in light of any new information that may come our way. Otherwise, how can we grow?

JESUS CLEARS THE TEMPLE

Matthew 21:12—13, John 2:16—17

¹²Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves. ¹³He said, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a place of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!"

¹⁶Then, going over to the people who sold doves, he told them, "Get these things out of here. Don't turn my Father's house into a marketplace!"

¹⁷Then his disciples remembered this prophecy from the Scriptures: "Passion for God's house burns within me."

What's confusing about this passage is that in many places in the Gospels, Jesus prays to God in locations other than the Temple, which demonstrates that God's spirit can't possibly be bound or contained in the Temple in Jerusalem. On top of that, it's hard to believe that Jesus would care so literally for bricks and stones piled one on top of another.

As can be seen in other passages, many times when Jesus says "temple" he means "body" or "soul." So in this sense, Jesus is saying, "Don't turn your body or soul into a den of thieves."

In other words, we need to clear those things which are contrary to God from our hearts, minds, and souls.

JESUS CURSES THE FIG TREE

Matthew 21:18-22

¹⁸ In the morning, as Jesus was returning to Jerusalem, he was hungry,¹⁹ and he noticed a fig tree beside the road. He went

over to see if there were any figs, but there were only leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" And immediately the fig tree withered up.

²⁰ The disciples were amazed when they saw this and asked, "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?"

²¹ Then Jesus told them, "I assure you, if you have faith and don't doubt, you can do things like this and much more. You can even say to this mountain, 'May God lift you up and throw you into the sea,' and it will happen."²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

Although the cursing of the fig tree is used to segue into a teaching about faith, it certainly sends a mixed message. The anger and lack of compassion demonstrated by Jesus goes against the beauty and love of other teachings, which tell us to be patient and understanding with those around us.

I see the cursing of the fig tree as a poor choice by the writers of the Gospels to help illustrate a teaching about faith; I don't see it as an actual event. The "mountain" in this passage represents *problems* we may have in life. If you were walking along from one destination to another, a mountain would be an obstacle. Jesus is saying to ask God to help remove any mountains (problems) that stand in the way of our spiritual goals, to "throw them into the sea," so to speak.

PARABLE OF THE GREAT FEAST

Matthew 22:2-14

² "The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son.³ Many guests were invited, and when the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify everyone that it was time to come. But

they all refused! ⁴ So he sent other servants to tell them, 'The feast has been prepared, and choice meats have been cooked. Everything is ready. Hurry!' ⁵ But the guests he had invited ignored them and went about their business, one to his farm, another to his store. ⁶ Others seized his messengers and treated them shamefully, even killing some of them.

⁷ "Then the king became furious. He sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their city. ⁸ And he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren't worthy of the honor.' ⁹ Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.' ¹⁰ So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ "But when the king came in to the guests, he noticed a man who wasn't wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. ¹² 'Friend,' he asked, 'how is it that you are here without wedding clothes?' But the man had no reply. ¹³ Then the king said to his aides, 'Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

¹⁴ "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Is this really an accurate portrayal of the Kingdom of God? I certainly hope not! In my view, all are called—all are chosen.

JESUS WARNS THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Matthew 23:1-36

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. ³ So practice and obey whatever they say to you, but don't follow their example. For they don't

practice what they teach.⁴ They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden.

⁵ "Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes.⁶ And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues.⁷ They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called 'Rabbi.'⁸ "Don't ever let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters.⁹ And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father.¹⁰ And don't let anyone call you 'Master,' for there is only one master, the Messiah.¹¹ The greatest among you must be a servant.¹² But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

¹³ "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you won't let others enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and you won't go in yourselves.¹⁵ Yes, how terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of hell as you yourselves are!

¹⁶ "Blind guides! How terrible it will be for you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple,'—you can break that oath. But then you say it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.'¹⁷ Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold, or the Temple that makes the gold sacred?¹⁸ And you say that to take an oath 'by the altar' can be broken, but to swear 'by the gifts on the altar' is binding.¹⁹ How blind! Which is greater, the gift on the altar, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ When you swear 'by the altar,' you are swearing by it and everything

on it.²¹ And when you swear 'by the Temple,' you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it.²² And when you swear 'by heaven,' you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.

²³ "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the more important things of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things.²⁴ Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, then you swallow a camel!

²⁵ "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!²⁶ Blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup, and then the outside will become clean, too.

²⁷ "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity.²⁸ You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed and decorate the graves of the godly people your ancestors destroyed.³⁰ Then you say, 'We would never have joined them in killing the prophets.'

³¹ "In saying that, you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.³² Go ahead. Finish what they started.³³ Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell? ³⁴ I will send you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. You will

kill some by crucifixion, and you whip others in the synagogues, chasing them from city to city.³⁵ As a result, you will become guilty of murdering all the godly people from righteous Abel to Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered in the Temple between the alter and the sanctuary.³⁶ I assure you, all the accumulated judgment of the centuries will break upon the heads of this very generation.”

These scriptures are problematic, to say the least. The person described as Jesus in these verses in no way resembles the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. Such varying images of Jesus are hard to reconcile. Which is the true representation? Was Jesus history’s biggest split-personality hypocrite? What do you think?

Jesus’ Birth and Miracle Stories

The beginning chapters of Matthew and Luke both include virgin birth stories, along with other early childhood events in the life of Jesus. Yet what’s interesting is that Mark, which nearly all scholars agree was the first Gospel written, has no mention of a virgin birth, nor does the Apostle Paul, whose letters predate all of the Gospels by as many as twenty years, according to some scholars.

Now I know you can’t prove a negative, but wouldn’t you think that if a virgin birth really did happen, and you were writing an account of Jesus’ life, that it would be kind of high on the list of things you’d want to include? In fact, Paul never describes even one miracle story about Jesus. While I’m open to the possibility that miraculous things can (and possibly do) happen, I’m also open to the possibility that the miracle stories in the four Gospels were meant to be allegories, used to convey

certain spiritual teachings. After many years of exploration, my personal opinion is that the latter is more often true.

The Gospel of John

As far as historians go, there seems to be absolutely no argument whatsoever that the Gospel of John was the latest of the four Gospels to be written. The time given is usually 90-100 AD (sometimes later)—give or take a few years.

To put that into perspective, Jesus is believed to have been crucified around the year 30 AD, so the Gospel of John was written 60-70+ years after Jesus' death. The other Gospels were written between 65-85 AD—still a significant time later.

The reason I mention this is because almost all of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John are *not* found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Again, why didn't the author of John include what was in the other Gospels (and vice versa)? Historians and theologians have many varying views on this. What do you think?

JESUS HEALS MANY PEOPLE

Matthew 15:29—31

²⁹Jesus returned to the Sea of Galilee and climbed a hill and sat down. ³⁰A vast crowd brought to him the lame, blind, crippled, mute, and many others. They laid them before Jesus, and he healed them all. ³¹The crowd was amazed! Those who hadn't been able to speak were talking, the crippled were made well, the lame were walking around, and those who had been blind could see again! And they praised the God of Israel.

Jesus' miracles can be seen in numerous ways. One is that it's an actual event as described, and the other is that it's a spiritual lesson. So in other words, God's ways can give "sight" to the spiritually blind, they make "complete" the spiritually lame, and they give "life" to the spiritually dead.

THE WIND AND THE WAVES

Matthew 8:23—27

²³Then Jesus got into the boat and started across the lake with his disciples. ²⁴Suddenly, a terrible storm came up, with waves breaking into the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. ²⁵The disciples went to him and woke him up, shouting, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

²⁶ And Jesus responded, "Why are you afraid? You have so little faith!" Then he stood up and rebuked the wind and waves, and suddenly all was calm. ²⁷The disciples were amazed. "Who is this man?" they asked themselves. "Even the winds and waves obey him!"

I view this passage as an allegory. It's meant to show us that when we have problems in our lives (wind and waves), we shouldn't be afraid. God will never let us drown in our problems.

JESUS FEEDS FOUR THOUSAND

Matthew 15:32—39

³²Then Jesus called his disciples and told them, "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days,

and they have nothing left to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry, or they will faint along the way."

³³The disciples replied, "Where would we get enough food here in the wilderness for such a huge crowd?"

³⁴Jesus asked, "How much bread do you have?"

They replied, "Seven loaves, and a few small fish."

³⁵So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground.

³⁶Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, and broke them into pieces. He gave them to the disciples, who distributed the food to the crowd. ³⁷They all ate as much as they wanted. Afterward, the disciples picked up seven large baskets of leftover food. ³⁸There were 4,000 men who were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children.

³⁹Then Jesus sent the people home, and he got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Magadan.

This passage can again be seen as an event or a parable. There is the literal interpretation (that Jesus actually fed four thousand people), and then there is the symbolic message.

Many times in the Gospels, Jesus refers to himself or his teachings as the "bread of life." In this parable, Jesus is giving "bread" (teachings) to his disciples and they are spreading them out to the people—a small example of how his teachings would "multiply" throughout the world.

FAITH OF THE ROMAN OFFICER

Matthew 8:5—13

⁵When Jesus arrived in Capernaum, a Roman officer came and pleaded with him, ⁶"Lord, my young servant lies in bed, paralyzed and racked with pain."

⁷Jesus said, "I will come and heal him."

⁸Then the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed! ⁹I know, because I am under the authority of my superior officers and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this or that,' they do it."

¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he was amazed. Turning to the crowd, he said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all the land of Israel! ¹¹And I tell you this, that many Gentiles will come from all over the world and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven. ¹²But many Israelites—those for whom the Kingdom was prepared—will be cast into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹³Then Jesus said to the Roman officer, "Go on home. What you have believed has happened." And the young servant was healed that same hour.

Although the lesson in this parable is about faith, there is more going on than meets the eye. For Jesus to help and heal a Roman was not something the Jewish people expected from their Messiah. The Jews saw the Romans as harsh oppressors whose greatest sin was not believing in the God of Israel. But Jesus' view was different; God loved the Romans, too.

It should be noted that the "Israelites for whom the kingdom was prepared" in verse 12 seem to have tried God's patience a little too much, and will be cast away into the "outer darkness."

It's unfortunate that an otherwise beautiful story should be brought down by lines like these.

SENSIBLE SERVENT

Matthew 24:45-51

⁴⁵ "Who is a faithful, sensible servant, to whom the master can give the responsibility of managing his household and feeding his family?⁴⁶ If the master returns and finds that the servant has done a good job, there will be a reward.⁴⁷ I assure you, the master will put that servant in charge of all he owns.⁴⁸ But what if the servant is evil and thinks, 'My master won't be back for a while,⁴⁹ and he begins beating the other servants, partying, and getting drunk?⁵⁰ Well, the master will return unannounced and unexpected.⁵¹ He will tear the servant apart and banish him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Would this depiction of God really pass the spiritual filters test? It's monstrous!

PARABLE OF THE TEN BRIDESMAIDS

Matthew 25:1-13

¹ "The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.³ The five who were foolish took no oil for their lamps,⁴ but the other five were wise enough to take along extra oil.⁵ When the bridegroom was delayed, they all lay down and slept.⁶ At midnight they were roused by the shout, 'Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and welcome him!'

⁷ "All the bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps.⁸ Then the five foolish ones asked the others, 'Please give us some of

your oil because our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the others replied, 'We don't have enough for all of us. Go to a shop and buy some for yourselves.'

¹⁰ "But while they were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was locked.¹¹ Later, when the other five bridesmaids returned, they stood outside, calling, 'Lord! Lord! Open the door for us!'¹² But he called back, 'I don't know you!'

¹³ "So stay awake and be prepared, because you do not know the day or hour of my return."

In light of all we've covered so far, can you really see God calling back, "I don't know you?" I can't.

PARABLE OF THE THREE SERVANTS

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and gave them money to invest for him while he was gone.¹⁵ He gave five bags of gold to one, two bags of gold to another, and one bag of gold to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

¹⁶ "The servant who received the five bags of gold began to invest the money immediately and soon doubled it.¹⁷ The servant with two bags of gold also went to work and doubled the money.¹⁸ But the servant who received the one bag of gold dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money for safekeeping.

¹⁹ "After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money.²⁰ The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of gold came forward and said, 'Sir, you gave me five bags of gold to invest, and I have doubled the amount.'²¹ The master was full of praise. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

²² "The servant who had received the two bags of gold came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two bags of gold to invest, and I have doubled the amount.'²³ The master said, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

²⁴ "Then the servant with the one bag of gold came and said, 'Sir, I know you are a hard man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate.'²⁵ I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth and here it is.'

²⁶ "But the master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! You think I'm a hard man, do you, harvesting crops I didn't plant and gathering crops I didn't cultivate?'²⁷ Well, you should have at least put my money into the bank so I could have some interest.'²⁸ Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of gold.'²⁹ To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who are unfaithful, even what little they have will be taken away.'³⁰ Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Another horrible representation of God.

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Matthew 25:31-46

³¹ "But when the Son of Man comes in all his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne.³² All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.³³ He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'³⁵ For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.³⁶ I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'

³⁷ "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink?³⁸ Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?³⁹ When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

⁴⁰ "And the King will tell them, 'I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'

⁴¹ "Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his demons.'⁴² For I was hungry, and you didn't feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn't give me a drink.⁴³ I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'

⁴⁴ "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?'

⁴⁵ "And he will answer, 'I assure you, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'

⁴⁶ "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life."

I wish this parable would have ended at the conclusion of verse 45, and omitted the second half of verse 41. If it had, it would have been a beautiful illustration.

THOSE WHO LIVE BY THE SWORD

Matthew 10:34, Luke 22:38

³⁴ "Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword."

³⁸ "Lord," they replied, "we have two swords among us."

"That's enough," he said.

Many times, people use these passages to justify violence or murder. But not once in Jesus' life did he injure or kill another person. In every opportunity Jesus saved life (except for the inexplicable cursing of the fig tree).

In fact, when looking at the lives of his followers, you'll see that there's not even one instance in the entire New Testament where a Christian kills another person, even in self-defense (save for one instance where a follower slashes off the ear of the high priest's servant (Luke 50), whom Jesus later heals).

BLIND SINCE BIRTH

John 9:1—5

¹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. ²"Teacher," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?"

³"It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him. ⁴All of us must quickly carry out the tasks assigned us by the one who sent me, because there is little time left before the night falls and all work comes to an end. ⁵But while I am still here in the world, I am the light of the world."

Some people use this passage as an argument in favor of reincarnation. When the disciples ask Jesus if the man's sins were his own fault or the fault of his parents, many reincarnation supporters question what kind of sins this man could have committed before being born. Thus, they say he must have committed these sins in a previous life, and that's what Jesus' disciples were referring to.

The fact of the matter is, whether reincarnation exists or we live only once, it doesn't change our goal in life, which is to live Godly lives and become unified with God and those around us.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Matthew 5:13

¹³"You are the salt of the earth."

Salt makes everything better. It brings the best qualities out of the food we eat, and has many other benefits. Jesus is saying that we are to

be “the salt of the earth,” enriching the world around us and making it better.

A SINCERELY REPENTANT HEART

Mark 3:28-29

²⁸“I assure you that any sin can be forgiven, including blasphemy;²⁹ but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. It is an eternal sin.”

It’s too bad it didn’t end after verse 28. The truth is, all of us sin, and sometimes the guilt we feel from it can be unbearable. But remember, God will always forgive a sincerely repentant heart.

ILLUSTRATION OF THE LAMP

Mark 4:21-25

²¹ Then Jesus asked them, “Would anyone light a lamp and then put it under a basket or under a bed to shut out the light? Of course not! A lamp is placed on a stand, where its light will shine.

²² Everything that is now hidden or secret will eventually be brought to light.²³ Anyone who is willing to hear should listen and understand.²⁴ And be sure to pay attention to what you hear. The more you do this, the more you will understand—and even more, besides.²⁵ To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them.”

To give something to someone and then take it away is not only unkind, it means that the gifts are conditional. I don't believe that any part of our relationship with God is based on rewards or penalties. When we do good, we feel unity with God and those around us; that is its own reward. Likewise, when we act selfishly, ungodly, or irresponsibly, it follows that we will feel more disconnected from God and others. Penalties and rewards are just the natural results of our thoughts and actions in the world.

Additionally, to say that we have free-will and then punish us for using that freedom would be akin to saying, "You're free to do what I want you to do, and if you don't, I'll hurt you." What kind of freedom is that?

THOUGHT-LIFE

Mark 7:20-23

"It is the thought-life that defiles you.²¹ For from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, eagerness for lustful pleasure, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you and make you unacceptable to God."

Although this is an excellent teaching on the dangers of self-indulgence, I take issue with the second part of the last line; I'm sure you can figure out why.

STORY OF THE EVIL FARMERS

Mark 12:1-11

¹ "A man planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country.² At the time of the grape harvest, he sent one of his servants to collect his share of the crop.³ But the farmers grabbed the servant, beat him up, and sent him back empty-handed.⁴ The owner then sent another servant, but they beat him over the head and treated him shamefully.⁵ The next servant he sent was killed. Others he sent were either beaten or killed,⁶ until there was only one left—his son whom he loved dearly. The owner finally sent him, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.'

⁷ "But the tenant farmers said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!'⁸ So they grabbed him and murdered him and threw his body out of the vineyard.

⁹ "What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do?" Jesus asked. "I'll tell you—he will come and kill them and lease the vineyard to others."¹⁰ Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures?

'The stone rejected by the builders
has now become the cornerstone.

¹¹ This is the LORD's doing,
and it is marvelous to see.'

“... He will come and kill them and lease the vineyard to others ...”
What kind of impression does that make of God? And if people believe

God is this way, is it really surprising when they act that way themselves?

NEW WINE, NEW WINESKINS

Matthew 9:17

¹⁷And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine must be stored in new wineskins. That way both the wine and the wineskins are preserved."

When Jesus says that we must put "new wine into new wineskins," he's saying that we must put a "new spirit" into a new heart, with new and right desires. We must let go of our old life and transform ourselves into the new life that Jesus has shown us.

REPUTATION

Luke 11:5-8

⁵ Then, teaching them more about prayer, he used this illustration: "Suppose you went to a friend's house at midnight, wanting to borrow three loaves of bread. You would say to him⁶ 'A friend of mine has just arrived for a visit, and I have nothing for him to eat.'⁷ He would call out from his bedroom, 'Don't bother me. The door is locked for the night, and we are all in bed. I can't help you this time.'⁸ But I tell you this—though he won't do it as a friend, if you keep knocking long enough, he will get up and give you what you want so his reputation won't be damaged."

When you give gifts in your own life, do you do it to avoid having a bad reputation, or do you do it because it brings you and those around you joy? Wouldn't it be the same with God?

BORN FROM ABOVE

John 3:3

³Jesus replied, "I assure you, unless you are born again (from above), you can never see the Kingdom of God."

Sometimes Christians dilute Jesus' message of unification into a mere statement of belief, saying that all we need to do is believe in Jesus to be saved. But Jesus taught us that following God requires a transformation of our souls, doing less and less evil and becoming more like God in everything we do.

INDISCRIMINATE LOVE

Matthew 5:43—48

⁴³"You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy.⁴⁴ But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! ⁴⁵In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

In this passage, Jesus teaches us that God's love is not selective—God loves the righteous as well as the sinner. For us to be “true children of our Father in Heaven,” we must do the same.

ALL AS ONE

John 17:21

²¹ My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me.

The strange and remarkably un-humble Jesus of the Gospel of John is, at times, very unappealing to me. This passage is a good example: a beautiful illustration, followed by an authoritarian proclamation.

THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Matthew 16:5—12

⁵Later, after they crossed to the other side of the lake, the disciples discovered they had forgotten to bring any food. ⁶“Watch out!” Jesus warned them. “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

⁷They decided he was saying this because they hadn't brought any bread. ⁸Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he said, “You have so little faith! Why are you worried about having no food? ⁹Won't you ever understand? Don't you remember the five thousand I fed with five loaves, and the baskets of food that were left over? ¹⁰Don't you remember the four thousand I fed with seven loaves, with baskets of food left over?”

¹¹How could you even think I was talking about food? So again I say, `Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.'"

¹²Then at last they understood that he wasn't speaking about yeast or bread but about the false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

In this passage, Jesus shows us that when he says, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," he's talking about their "teachings." Likewise, when Jesus tells us to "eat his body and drink his blood (Mark 14:22-24)," he's talking about his teachings and his ways.

In John, Jesus speaks of himself as "The bread of life (6:35)." Just as food keeps us alive, Jesus is saying that his words (spiritual teachings) keep us spiritually alive. If we don't have food daily, we would physically die. The same is true about "the bread of life"; if we don't read and practice spiritual ways daily, we could become spiritually dead.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Living the spiritual life is more than just following what a book says, it's following what the *spirit* says. That's the part of us that's most capable of connecting with God. The spirit within is our *true essence*. As spiritual people, when something we learn or are told about God doesn't feel right to us, we must have faith that God will lead us to the truth. We must believe that it's possible and let God lead the way.

There have been plenty of people since Jesus who have taken what Jesus or other religious figures have said and advanced or evolved what they taught to make it even better. As people, we're constantly finding better words and ways to understand not only the truth about God, but the truth about us, our souls, and how everything fits in the grand scheme of things.

We must be willing to put the love of God and unity of all at the head of the table. I'm not saying that we need to throw people like Jesus, Moses, or Muhammad out of the banquet hall; on the contrary, there's much to learn from all religious texts, but what's important is to always test what we encounter through the filters of love and unity, and if they don't pass the test, we must be willing to look for something that will.

We all must follow what we feel is right. You may not agree with everything I believe in and vice versa, but we mustn't shy away from talking it out open-mindedly and seeing what we come up with.

The religious and spiritual people of the world today need a revolution. We need to evolve beyond the schizophrenic images of God we've held for thousands of years and embrace a new understanding, one that combines the best of what the past and present have to offer, while letting go of any distorted, man-made dogmas that seem only to keep us apart from each other and from God.

If we hold on to and preserve "sacred scriptures" like some of the ones covered in this book—scripture that actually condones hatred, violence, and judgment—there's absolutely no hope for a better future or a better world.

It's time to ask ourselves the tough questions, let go of empty traditions, discard hateful teachings, and understand that we're *all* chosen—that we're *all* loved—and we should love *all*.

So what will it be? Will you ask the tough questions? Will you have the courage to seek the answers, no matter where they lead? It may mean having to leave your comfort zone and confronting God and yourself in a whole new way. It may mean giving up the feeling of security you get when you believe that your church or religion has it all figured out. Can you really say that's true after reading this book? What happens when you don't have the authority of a holy book to back your claims? Can you put faith in God to lead you to the truth? Can you let

go of your ego, your pride, your selfish desires—and see the spiritual world of God and your own soul?

Explore. Experience. Enjoy.

Dedication

To my mother, who taught me love. To my father, who showed me how to think for myself. And to the rest of my family and friends—
you'll never be forgotten.

And to God—thank you for teaching me and guiding me, and showing me the full extent of your love and grace.

Footnotes

- [1] Anthony de Mello: *The Way to Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony de Mello* (Image Books, Doubleday, 1995).
- [2] Anthony de Mello: *Awareness* (Collins Fount, 1990).
- [3] James Allen: *As a Man Thinketh* (Fall River Press, 1992).
- [4] Leo Tolstoy, *On Life and Essays on Religion* (Oxford University Press, 1959).
- [5] Wayne Dyer: *The Power of Intention* (Hay House, 2005).
- [6] Epictetus, *The Art of Living: A New Interpretation* by Sharon Lebell (MJF Books, 1995).
- [7] Although this quote is most often credited to Viktor Frankl, it's source is actually found in the forward to the book, *Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles for Discovering Meaning in Life and Work*, by Stephen Covey (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).
- [8] Though commonly attributed to Abraham Lincoln, no source for the quote has ever been found.
- [9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joel Porte, *Emerson in His Journals* (Belknap Press, 1984).
- [10] The Buddha, *Dhammapada: A Rendering* by Thomas Byrom (Shambhala, New Edition, 1993).
- [11] Delivered in a speech entitled, *The Nature of Matter*, Florence, Italy, 1944.
- [12] For more information on near-death experiences, see the books *Evidence of the Afterlife* by Jeffrey Long, M.D. and Paul Perry (HarperOne, 2010) and *God and the Afterlife* by Jeffrey Long, M.D. and Paul Perry (HarperOne, 2016).
- [13] Letter of 1950, as quoted in *The New York Times* (29, March 1972) and the *New York Post* (28, November 1972).
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- [16] Found quoted in the book, *The Art of Being: 101 ways to Practice Purpose in Your Life*, by Dennis Merritt Jones (Tarcher Perigee, 2009).
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- [20] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Vintage, Reprint edition, 2008).
- [21] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (Oxford University Press, 2017).
- [22] Leo Tolstoy: *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Barnes & Noble, 2005).