



## When in Doubt ... **READ THE BOOK!**

Life as it was designed to be

by Rev. Stephen Hower

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### **AN UNEXPECTED MESSAGE**

It was unseasonably cold, the wind was gusty, and rain had dogged the proceedings since early morning. The date was March 4, 1865, and President Lincoln was about to deliver his second inaugural address. His reelection had looked doubtful, even impossible, but then Sherman took Atlanta, and Admiral Farragut seized the Southern stronghold at Mobile Bay. Lincoln's margin of victory was sizable.

As he stepped to the podium, the mood of the crowd was obvious. The end of the war was in sight. In six weeks Richmond would fall and Lee would be forced to surrender. The war had proved more brutal than any had predicted. In more than 2,200 engagements the North had lost more than 360,000 of her sons. Another 258,000 had been sent home too maimed or sick to fight, many would never work again. With victory in hand, it was time for retribution. On that March morning the nation's mood was as ugly as the weather.

It was a haggard and war-weary president who arose to speak. He was about to tell the nation what it needed to hear, which bore little resemblance to what the people wanted to hear. Incredibly, his speech spread the blame equally on the North and South, calling slavery a "hateful and evil practice" and "a sin in the sight of God." The war, he said, was a terrible retribution, a punishment for allowing human bondage to flourish on the nation's soil. Then, as the crowd grew silent, he briefly outlined the nation's course with these few, well-chosen words:

"With malice toward none: with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

It was not what the people of the North *wanted* to hear, but it was what they *needed* to hear.

### **WHO WILL TELL US WHAT WE NEED TO HEAR?**

Our world is not much different than Lincoln's. The Internet and newspapers deliver fresh atrocities to us daily: children die at their parents' hands, artillery shells kill civilians in war-torn countries, car bombs destroy innocent people in places like Baghdad, Jerusalem, London, and Oklahoma City.

Most would admit that our personal lives are more troubled and stressful than we would like. Our homes are divided, and our lives are so hectic we hardly have time to talk to one another. When we take the time, we are so exhausted it gets wasted on pointless arguments or we sleep away the fatigue.

We know what we want, but we don't know how to achieve it. Who will tell us what we need to hear? If any people ever needed healing or to be rescued—we do!

Words like these sound mighty inviting:

*“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”*

A man named Isaiah wrote these words almost 3,000 years ago (Isaiah 40:28-31). Like Lincoln, he was writing to a war-weary people. They wanted him to talk about victory, not endurance; about revenge, not faith. But God used Isaiah to share the message His people needed to hear, not just what they wanted to hear.

## **CAN ANY RELIGION REALLY HELP?**

“Frankly, most of the preachers I've heard might as well be speaking a foreign language. Their religion seems so impractical. I know I'm expected to care about eternal things, but I'm having a hard time dealing with the 'right-now' things!” Most would agree. We are so busy putting out fires in our lives that we have no time to listen to a lecture on prevention. Yet, prevention is exactly what we need to practice!

The LORD whom Isaiah spoke about, still cares about people's “right-now” problems. He cares about yours! Despite all the talk of coming “fire and brimstone,” the Lord Jesus didn't come to save us from our future. In truth, He came to save us from our past, which is having a devastating effect on our present, and has the potential to ruin our future as well.

True religion is not about “rights and wrongs” or “dos and don'ts.” It's about God's overwhelming concern for us and the devastating impact sin (the root source of our problems) is having on our lives. Our lives are a mess—and not without reason. We have tried to live them our way without understanding the whole picture. We have troubles and problems but often don't know what's wrong. And because of that we can't know if it can be made right. Perhaps it's time to get back to the *Owner's Manual* to see how these lives were actually designed to work! As they say, “When in doubt ... READ THE BOOK.”

## **INSTRUCTIONS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE**

When our family moved to the country we had to ditch our gas appliances since there were no gas lines where we built. We swapped the dealer for a “just-like-new” matching washer and dryer. The other day our “just-like-new” washer began to smell like burning rubber during the spin cycle. No problem, I reasoned. It just needs a new drive belt, and I've changed those before. After completely dismantling the troubled machine from the top down, I found the belts were located under the machine in an easy-to-reach location. After an hour of reassembling, I changed the ruined belt in just a few minutes. It would have helped if I'd had an owner's manual!

The story goes on. I confidently refilled the tub, but the washer wouldn't spin. Now something was really wrong! I finally broke down and called the repairman. He noticed the problem right away. It was the oddest thing, somehow the wash tub was firmly resting against the outer tub, which, of course, kept it from spinning. After he restored the proper alignment, it worked “just-like-new” again. I didn't have the heart to admit I had taken the tubs apart and reassembled them improperly, but I suspect he knew anyway. It would have helped if I'd had an owner's manual!

The right instructions can make all the difference. That's true for life too! We can learn from the Owner's Manual, or we can learn the hard way. Through instruction from the God who made us, we can avoid the consequence of sin—sin which always complicates, confuses and, eventually, destroys. Too many of us are learning by the trial-and-error method—and the results are anything but pleasing!

The consequence for my lack of washing machine knowledge was a \$45 repair bill. The consequence for insufficient knowledge of life can be a debt far greater. We've already run up a huge debt—far larger than we could ever pay ourselves. Thankfully, it's

a debt we need not pay. The bill has been paid already. And not only has the bill been paid, our *Bill-payer* has also left a guide which, if followed, can spare us the consequence of costly future mistakes.

## CONSULT THE OWNER'S MANUAL ON SALVATION

Salvation, as you might have guessed, is the most important lesson in God's book of knowledge. It means the difference between life in heaven or life in hell.

Despite what you may have heard, this is the least complicated of all the issues being debated by the world's religions. In fact, there are only two opinions on the subject and they are so different it is easy to tell them apart. First, there are those religions that teach you what *you must do* to please God—how you can pay off your debt. This is the majority of all religions.

The second, held by only ONE religion, teaches you what **God has done** to make you righteous—how He has paid off your debt for you. The only religion that teaches this is Christianity. This religion—this faith—is based on the belief that Christ died on the cross and suffered the pains of hell in our place, on our behalf, and that by believing in Him we are set free from the debt of sin.

The first group teaches that you must do certain things, avoid other things, and follow certain rules in order to become acceptable to God. Don't be surprised if some Christian churches sound a lot like those religions. This is the religion that comes *naturally* to us. It's the old "pull yourself up by your own boot-straps" approach, so it's easy to slip into and, therefore, very important to be on guard against!

Our Lord Jesus alerts us to the danger:

*"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ... Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your Name, and in Your Name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evil doers!'"* (Matthew 7:16, 21-23).

Jesus said the difference is as obvious as figs and thistles. Even those who don't garden can tell what is edible and what is not. As Jesus said, we should be choosy, learning from only those "... *who do the will of My Father.*" But what is the will of the Father on the issue of salvation? Weren't those people who were prophesying and casting out demons and performing miracles doing the will of the Father? It appears Jesus didn't think so. He said, "*I never knew you.*" Then He actually calls them "evil doers!" If doing all of those holy religious things don't qualify you for salvation what, if anything, can? Well, when in doubt ... READ THE BOOK:

*"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"* (Ephesians 2:8-10).

The Owner's Manual is very clear. It isn't the good things we do or the bad things we avoid that results in our salvation. It is God's goodness and our faith in His promise that results in our salvation. What promise is that? It is the promise of Christmas and fulfillment of Easter. It's knowing that Jesus—God's Son—came down from heaven to live, die and rise from the dead for all for us. It's believing that somehow in God's plan, the suffering and death of Jesus paid the price for our costly mistakes (sin), and that His rising from the dead was proof to us that death has been conquered for everyone.

The Book says,

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

Eternal life is not something we have to wait for or earn. Everyone that believes in what Jesus did for them has eternal life right now! And with eternal life comes the assurance of peace with God our Maker. We no longer live in fear of His anger or judgment. As The Book says,

*“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”* (Romans 8:31b, 32).

Each and every day, with every right-now problem we might face, we can go to Him and know He will respond in the best possible way for our situation. It may not necessarily be in the way we *want* Him to respond, but in the way He knows to be the best, the way we *need* Him to respond! In prayer, like in everything else, we want what is best, not what we *think* is best. Because we believe in His love for us for Jesus’ sake, we know we can leave the answer and the outcome to the Lord.

## IS THERE REALLY A HEAVEN AND HELL?

The answer to this question is important. It will affect the way you live your life each and every day. According to surveys, most Americans believe in heaven and expect to go there. Far fewer people believe in hell—and only a very few think they’ll end up there!

Books about life after death have become very popular. Betty Eadie wrote *Embraced By The Light*, a *New York Times* best-seller. Based solely on a personal, 20-year-old “near death experience,” she offers her opinion on the subject. According to Eadie, everyone will find themselves in heaven eventually. If you’ve lived an extremely evil life, you will simply have to spend more time in the dark tunnel leading to a place of perfect peace—not unlike a heavy wash cycle for the extra dirty. Heaven will not be a new place for Eadie, she believes we began life there as angels before our birth. Earth is just an opportunity we have to develop a “higher level of understanding”—whatever that means. Like they say, “Opinions are like noses, everybody has one, and some are more interesting than others.”

When in doubt, or when faced with conflicting opinions, Christians consult The Book. The Lord’s Owner’s Manual is not fuzzy about heaven or hell—or about who will go where. Heaven is described as fullness of joy (see Psalm 16:11 ESV) and a blessed reunion of Christian friends and family (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Hell is also very real and graphically described as “eternal punishment” (see Matthew 25:46) and a place of darkness and gnashing of teeth (see Matthew 25:30). Quoting an Old Testament reference, Jesus described it as unending torment where “*their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*” (Mark 9:48 RSV).

Contrary to Ms. Eadie and the popular opinion of those polled, the vast majority of people are on a collision course with hell and can expect to encounter the terrible conditions described in The Book. Contrast Jesus’ statement about the way to heaven with those popular today:

*“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate, and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”* (Matthew 7:13-14).

It is not the length of time in “the tunnel” that determines the outcome. The Book says:

*Whoever believes in Him [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the Name of God’s one and only Son”* (John 3:18).

## WHAT ABOUT MY LIFE HERE AND NOW?

“But,” some might say, “I’m not a bad person. I don’t deserve hell. In fact, I’ve lived a pretty good life: kind, generous, helping those in need. Isn’t that enough?”

Not every life lived outside the Christian faith is a failure by the most common measures of success. People that do not consider themselves Christians live happy lives, too, with happy families, good jobs, and caring friends. Both Christians and non-Christians contribute to the betterment of society and care about what is morally right and wrong.

The difference between the two is found, not in their behavior, so much as in their motive. As we read earlier (Ephesians 2:8-10), Christians are saved from hell by God's grace (His love alone) so that they can do good works. There may be a thousand different reasons why non-Christians would strive to live good lives. A thousand years before the birth of Jesus, David, king of the nation of Israel, compared the different motives in works that are now a part of God's Book:

*"Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me in the shadow of Your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me ... O lord, by Your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those You cherish; their sons have plenty, and they store up wealth for their children. And I—in righteousness I will see Your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing Your likeness" (Psalm 17:8-9,14-15).*

Non-Christians live for the rewards of this life. Christians live this life in thanksgiving for the rewards they have been given in the life to come. We enjoy the Lord's blessing now and look forward to a return to conditions like those in the Garden of Eden, which will not come by our efforts, but as a gift from God to all who believe.

## **EVEN A GOOD LIFE WITHOUT PURPOSE REMAINS EMPTY**

Not everyone enjoys "the good life." It is tempting to consider the lack of material success as failure. But there's a problem in that opinion because the definition of success is so subjective. What is "success"? How much is enough? Is there ever enough?

Consider a famous football player in the middle of his "success," describing his emptiness: "I sit in my house and sometimes I get so lonely it's unbelievable. Life has been so good to me. I've got a great wife, good kids, money, great health, but I'm lonely and bored. ... I often wondered why so many rich people commit suicide. Money sure isn't the cure-all."

Our lives are meant to have a purpose beyond the accumulation of wealth, power and prestige. We are made to serve. Non-Christians may wonder how Christians can be happy with a life of sacrifice and service. What looks difficult and sacrificial to a non-Christian looks quite different through the eyes of someone who believes in God's love and blessings in Jesus Christ. No one has stated that attitude better than Francis of Assisi when he prayed,

"Lord, make me the instrument of Thy peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light; and  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much  
Seek to be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love;  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and  
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Remember, our greatest need is for someone to tell us what we need to hear, not what we want to hear. Francis of Assisi is right; things aren't always as they seem. It is in giving that we receive. When in doubt ... READ THE BOOK.

The Book says, *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. ... This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man [or woman] without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 1:25; 2:13-14 NRSV).*

Christians should not be surprised if non-Christians find their lives to be somewhat foolish. Non-Christians "just don't get it" when it comes to matters that must be accepted on faith.

## SOME THINGS ARE DIFFICULT EVEN FOR CHRISTIANS TO UNDERSTAND

Mature Christians will admit that some things are more difficult than others to understand. Even The Book talks about “elementary teachings” and those things that require “greater maturity” (see Hebrews 6:1). In one letter, the apostle Peter said that the apostle Paul’s letters “*contain some things that are hard to understand*” (2 Peter 3:16b). If Peter, an apostle who lived and walked with Jesus, admits The Book contains some difficult things, it must be okay for us to admit we get stumped now and then, too!

It’s also good to know we are not left to wrestle with the Lord’s Owner’s Manual all alone. God promises to send us His Spirit through His Word to help us understand this special message. The apostle Paul counted on it!

*“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power”* (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Every time you open The Book, God is by your side to help you understand and apply the truth to your life.

The Book even predicts that some things about life will remain a mystery. In his last speech to the children of Israel, Moses wrote,

*“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this Law”* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Some things we are not intended to know or capable of understanding. A wise man once said it was not the complicated things in The Book that bothered him. It was the things he understood that gave him pause.

## WHEN IN DOUBT ... READ THE BOOK

Not everyone wants to hear the truth. Some want to hear folks tell them everything is fine and that nothing really matters. In the last letter he wrote before his death, Paul predicted such attitudes would prevail:

*“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry”* (2 Timothy 4:3-5).

How did Timothy know what to do? Easy. He had The Book. Paul told him,

*“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage— with great patience and careful instruction”* (2 Timothy 4:2).

In other words, Paul told Timothy, “Don’t tell them what they want to hear. Tell them what they need to hear. Help them understand The Book!”

## WHAT NEXT?

How about you? Are you ready for The Book? I know you've already heard some things about it, or even from it. You probably have some idea about what it is going to tell you. Maybe you think it's just going to tell you how bad you are and about all the wrong things you do. Well, as we said before, "true religion is not about 'rights and wrongs' or, 'dos and don'ts.' It's about God's overwhelming concern for us and the devastating impact sin is having on our lives."

Certainly, if God truly loves us, He is going to tell us not to do those things that harm us so badly. After warning his young friend Timothy about the troubles and evil that sin leads to, the apostle Paul urges,

*"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).*

See the point? The Book may place restrictions and limitations on how you *want* to live, but only because what you want may go against how you *need* to live, how you were *designed* to live—designed by a loving God who wants us to live with Him in perfection forever.

As The Book says,

*"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).*

## NOTES

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