

Blockages to Faith

Our **mental framework** (deep-seated *beliefs* about how life works) directly influences how we live – whether we are aware of it or not. Without God’s influence, our interpretations of life experiences feed our mental framework in ways that often lead to faulty conclusions. Consequently, we need to maintain an openness to having our beliefs challenged. Maintaining an open mind allows our mental framework to be modified. A lack of openness makes it impossible to discover errors in our thinking and understanding. If you accept that you do not possess a perfect knowledge of everything about life, then at least some of your beliefs need to change. This means we must be cautious about how we interpret our life experiences. Sometimes, we will be presented with information contradicting a closely held belief. In these instances, we must be open to modifying or discarding one or more of our beliefs.

The peril of embracing false beliefs lies in the potential to overlook crucial truths that God wishes to reveal to you. For instance, if you adopt the notion that hardship or loss signifies God’s abandonment or betrayal, you’ll miss out on the opportunity to see how God can use adversity and loss to bring you closer to Him, to foster character and deeper trust within you, and to impart vital lessons. All these benefits can be forfeited by clinging too tightly to a false belief about God’s nature or His design for life.

Many non-Christians have encountered religious ideas and religious individuals, or have had church experiences that have sown seeds of misconceptions about God and Christianity. Similarly, numerous Christians have imbibed (or formulated on their own) beliefs that are not entirely accurate – and in some cases, completely false. In this chapter, my primary aim is to confront some of these widely held misconceptions that impede our connection with God. These misunderstandings about God, life, religion, the Church, or Christianity, if they form part of your mental framework, can dampen your desire to seek God and hinder your ability to grasp His true nature and His intended way of life.

Our lives are driven by our thoughts, beliefs, and the plans we make for ourselves. While we sometimes think about the deep-seated dreams in our hearts, we usually focus on short-term goals. One of the circumstances that frustrates me most is how our interpretation of life experiences can convince us of false beliefs that, in turn, hinder us from becoming and experiencing all the amazing things God desires for us. Fortunately, on many occasions throughout our lives, God “intervenes” in ways designed to draw our attention to Him so He can modify those false beliefs and redirect our lives in significant ways. God’s “interventions” often occur during a conversation with someone, after we have experienced a great accomplishment, failure, or some tragic event, or when we find ourselves pushed outside our comfort zone. There may also be times when you yearn for something deeper in life. These are just a few examples of the kinds of life events that God uses to draw our attention to Him. I have noticed that the

birth of a child or being present at a wedding ceremony or a memorial service are life events that frequently cause people to think about their lives globally, wondering if they might be missing something important. In each of these instances, and many more, God reaches out to draw our attention to Him. In John 6:44, Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws them*.” God is regularly reaching out to you, attempting to get your attention. However, if you hold certain false beliefs about God or spiritual matters, you will be inclined to quickly dismiss these “invitations” to connect with Him.

The following are common false beliefs that can prevent you from responding to God when He reaches out to you. If any of these false beliefs are present in your mental framework, they will likely interfere with your ability to respond to God’s “invitations” to draw near to Him. If you recognize that any of these “beliefs” are present in your mental framework, you need to be aware that these issues must be resolved to connect with God more deeply. If the insights presented cannot remove the false belief entirely, you must seek God with greater intentionality to resolve the issue. God will *a/ways* respond when we seek to know and understand the truths of life. But recognize also that God often directs us to other sources – like books or conversations with informed people – to aid us in our journey to know and follow Him.

False beliefs that can block you from seeking or following God.

I. God is angry and vindictive.

Many people believe that God is a grumpy old grouch who has established a bunch of rules that are supposed to be followed, and He looks angrily upon people any time they make a mistake, often punishing them for their failure to obey Him. For people who hold this belief, following God means giving up many of the things they enjoy, as well as feeling guilty much of the time because they can’t always do what they know is right! If you believe God acts in these ways, you will probably prefer to have nothing to do with Him. But this belief is absolutely false!

God is not angry with you, nor is He disappointed in you! In contrast to this false belief, God is actually kind, gentle, patient, and merciful. People tend to hold this inaccurate opinion of God’s character because of things they’ve heard people say about God rather than from personal interactions with Him. You must understand that the only way to really “know” someone is to spend a great deal of time with them – hearing them speak and observing how they react in various situations. Consider the following biblical passages, written by individuals who engaged in personal interactions with God, describing what they have experienced.

Psalm 86: ¹⁵ But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.

Psalm 116: ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate.

Ephesians 4: ³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

As you understand God better and interact personally with Him, you will discover He is a loving, kind, patient, merciful, and compassionate Father who desires that you experience a rich, full, happy life. Every time He intervenes in your life, you will experience greater happiness and fulfillment. **God is always on your side**, longing for you to experience an ever-growing sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. As you personally interact with Him, you will experience these aspects of His character through the words He speaks, the strength, peace, comfort, and joy He provides, and the actions He encourages you to take. One of our major problems is that we think we know what is in our best interest. But we are wrong about many, many things. God needs to replace our false beliefs with truth. God is not angry and vindictive!

II. **God punishes you for the mistakes you make.**

This belief is closely related to the previous one about believing God is an angry old grouch. When God created the heavens and the earth, He also set in place the principles governing everything He had created. Any activity contrary to those principles is likely to result in less-than-desirable outcomes. However, the outcomes we experience when a life principle is violated are **natural consequences rather than punishments**.

For example, if I jump off the roof of my house, I am likely to be seriously injured or perhaps even killed. God would not have **caused** my injuries; any suffering I experience will be a natural consequence of my stupidity or carelessness. When God designed our bodies, they were built to withstand a limited amount of physical impact. Any force beyond that limit will result in injury. The larger the force of the impact, the greater the injury that will result. This is a truth – a pre-established life principle – that governs how our physical bodies are designed to function. If you understand and abide by this truth, you will avoid injury. If you violate this life principle, you will experience pain and suffering. Similarly, one should expect that violating other life principles God has established will also result in unpleasant outcomes.

We must understand that God created principles that govern not only the physical aspects of His creation but also **how every aspect of His creation functions**. So, God's principles govern not only the tangible physical aspects of our lives but also our emotional, psychological, and spiritual lives. The truth is, rather than punishing us for our mistakes, God often mercifully intervenes in ways that protect us from experiencing the full impact of our actions that are contrary to the principles He has established. In many instances, God allows us to experience some degree of pain, suffering, or sorrow when we violate His principles or standards. However, the negative

consequences we experience are not punishments or retribution – a desire for us to suffer a penalty for our misdeeds. Instead, God’s intent for any of our sufferings or disappointments is always to instruct us – to help us better understand who He is, how He designed life to be lived, and encourage us to think and act differently.

Romans 8: ²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

This promise applies not only to the consequences you experience because of someone else’s failures but also to the consequences you experience from your own mistakes – even when you purposely ignore His guidance. The Bible uses the word **discipline** to describe how God intervenes in our lives – much like how we might discipline our own children – intending to help us develop character and the kinds of personal practices that will allow us to experience the “full” life He has planned for us. I will go into greater detail about many of these important principles in the chapter titled “How has God Designed Life to be Lived?” But for now, allow the following passages to help you better understand God’s character.

Hebrews 12: ¹⁰ God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.

Job 5: ¹⁷ Blessed is the one whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. ¹⁸ For He wounds, but He also binds up; He injures, but His hands also heal.

Proverbs 3: – ¹¹ My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent His rebuke, ¹² because the LORD disciplines those He loves, as a father the son he delights in.

III. **God wants you to follow many rules that will rob your life of joy.**

God has indeed designated a significant number of principles that govern every aspect of life. But everything God created – and the principles that govern them – is designed to empower us to experience a rich, meaningful, productive, and fulfilling life. Recall Jesus’ statement about His purpose for coming to earth,

John 10: ¹⁰ “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

God really desires for you to experience a meaningful, purposeful, and genuinely fulfilling life! Our problem is that we have often found avenues that bring a *modicum* of pleasure but have totally misunderstood the actions, motivations, and experiences that result in the most significant amount of joy, peace, happiness, and fulfillment. That is why we keep looking for something “more” – some experience, possession, or relationship that will not disappoint. We have all experienced the reality of seeking after something we believed would make us happy, and then, after the good feelings begin to

dissipate, we embark on a search for something “better.” God has plans for our lives that will not disappoint!

In truth, we are prisoners of our own ignorance. Because we have sought to discover the “full” life on our own – without God’s guidance – we have created a set of beliefs (mental framework) that fails to accomplish our deep-seated desire for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. God has the same desires for us that we have for ourselves – even **more** than we could ask or think. However, we will only experience the “full” life when we follow God’s design for life, including how we live and interact with Him and others. The reality is that ***we prevent ourselves from experiencing our dream life by refusing to seek and follow God.*** The life principles you discover on your journey to know God will result in understandings and actions that will help you better follow God and experience the incredible blessings He desires to release in your life.

Jeremiah 29: ¹¹ “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Isaiah 41: ¹⁰ “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Psalms 32: ⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.

IV. **Christians are a bunch of hypocrites.**

This belief, unfortunately, is **not** entirely false! Many, if not all, Christians **are** hypocrites! However, if properly understood, this observation should **not** be a reason to reject God’s invitation to seek and follow Him. Why not? In part because Jesus had the same observation while He was here on earth. In fact, Jesus directly accused the religious leaders of His day of being hypocrites. One of the places you’ll find Jesus’ criticisms of those leaders is in the Book of Matthew. The entirety of Chapter 23 is a criticism of the religious leaders. But verses 23 through 26 are probably the most striking:

Matthew 23: ²³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. ²⁵ Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-

indulgence. ²⁶Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

As you can see from this passage, Jesus was very critical of many people who professed to follow God. The same is true today. Christians are hypocrites in that they profess ideals they often fail to fully live up to. And most Christians know that is true about themselves. The major difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is that the Christian recognizes their guilt, as well as their inability to live up to their ideals fully. Christians also understand that they need to find a way to overcome the burden of the guilt they feel each time they fail to live up to the standards they embrace. Christians understand that through Jesus’ sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection, they are forgiven and set free from their guilt. Their appreciation for God’s Grace extended to them creates a deeper desire to know and follow Him.

From a biblical perspective, *everyone is guilty* of violating God’s principles for life. And everyone knows this is true of themselves. This reality is highlighted throughout scripture, but one of the places it is stated most directly is in Romans 3:23 – “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But the verse goes on to say, “And all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” So, even though Christians often violate the standards they claim to believe, they are still accepted and forgiven by God. The proper Christian perspective is to humbly acknowledge one’s failures and shortcomings – and many Christians do. But just because some Christians fail to act that way doesn’t mean that God’s principles are wrong. In other words, the fact that some Christians profess standards they fail to follow fully doesn’t negate the validity of those standards. Jesus gives some instructions about dealing with our shortcomings and how we should relate to others.

Matthew 7: ¹“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Jesus’ encouragement here is to humbly deal with one’s shortcomings and find resolution *before* instructing others about God’s principles for life. The observation of the hypocrisy of Christians is well-founded, but it’s not a reason for rejecting an invitation from God. Don’t allow other people’s shortcomings to prevent you from responding to God’s invitation as He reaches out to you. More mature Christians, who have appropriately acknowledged their shortcomings, are guided by biblical principles like the following and interact with humility and grace when proclaiming God’s truths.

Colossians 3: ¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Ephesians 4: ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Micah 6: ⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

v. I could never live up to God's expectations.

This is another *true* belief. However, it is *not* a reason to avoid God. **It's precisely the reason why you need Him!** As I have already mentioned several times, each of us has a dream in our hearts that our lives should have meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. However, that's not the only dream we embrace. In the depths of our hearts, we also have a picture of the person we could and should become – a person of strength, dignity, confidence, and integrity, facing and overcoming all life's challenges. And, somehow, we also have the awareness that those two dreams are intricately woven together. But as I examine my own life, I have never been able – on my own – to fully harness the focus, strength, and courage needed to fully become the person I know I should be.

And that's not just my problem. That's your problem too! None of us, in our power, can ever become the person we should be and experience a life rich in meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. That's because **God designed life so that we need Him!** And **that's why God doesn't reject us because of our shortcomings!** Instead of believing that you must *avoid* God because of your limitations, that belief must be replaced with the understanding that **God wants to empower you to overcome your shortcomings.** Consider the following biblical passages that affirm this truth.

Psalms 32: ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

Proverbs 3: ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

John 14: ²⁶ The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

Isaiah 40: ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

~~31~~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.

VI. **God could never forgive me for some of the things I have done.**

When we think about living up to God's expectations, another thought that can plague us is that God could never forgive us for some of our past mistakes – especially those we knew were wrong but did anyway. This kind of guilt can block any progress in your life. But the Bible makes it clear that this reasoning is faulty. The truth is that God accepts you – fully and completely – just as you are. Nothing you can do or fail to do will **ever** change His love for you. God offers Himself to you freely and in full measure.

Psalms 103: – ¹⁰ He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Isaiah 43: ²⁵ “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.”

1 John 1: ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

One additional issue can prevent us from responding to God's invitations to connect with Him. And that is the anger, resentment, and bitterness that often comes from being disappointed that God failed to come through for you in some critical way in the past. Most of us have experienced the disappointment caused by God's failure to fulfill a deep-seated desire when we hoped and prayed that He would come through for us. And that disappointment rests on the following false belief.

VII. **God “controls” everything that happens.**

While it's true that God **can** intervene in our lives in absolutely any way He desires (omnipotence), it doesn't necessarily follow that He **always exercises that ability**. One of the essential principles we need to understand is that God created people to have free will – the ability to decide for themselves how they will act. Using that free will has resulted in many of the tragic outcomes that have occurred throughout history. Many people wonder why, if God is all-knowing (omniscient), He would create us with free will instead of just “programming” us to do what was right all the time. I believe God gave us free will because He desires to be loved, and He understands love must be freely given to be genuine.

So, the truth is that God **allows** everything that occurs rather than **causing** everything that occurs. That begs the question, “Why does God allow bad things to

happen to good people?” That’s a question for which an entire library of books has been written, so I won’t try to supply a complete response here. However, the short answer, unfortunately, is that there are no people who are fully good – we all fall short of perfection! Sometimes, people experience suffering or loss because of their own shortcomings, and sometimes, people experience suffering or loss as a consequence of the shortcomings of others. But in all circumstances, God allows suffering or loss so He can re-direct our lives in some particular way. What’s essential for us to understand here is that God feels sorrow and grief each time we experience suffering or loss. But He also reaches out to us to provide the comfort we need to heal and move forward. The following are just a few biblical passages communicating God’s feelings about our suffering and loss.

Hebrews 4: ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Psalms 34: ¹⁷ The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; He delivers them from all their troubles. ¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Matthew 11: ²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

These are just a few of the many beliefs and questions that can prevent us from responding to “invitations” God repeatedly sends us to turn our attention to Him so He can guide and empower our lives in ways that will produce the “full” life we so deeply desire. As I pondered the question of what issues I should include in this chapter, many other thoughts came to mind: I’m not worthy of God’s attention; religion is just a crutch; I’m already a good person; all the church wants is my money; God has more important things to do than being concerned about me; God doesn’t love me; and God is just an image created by people to control others. You may have other questions or thoughts that prevent you from seeking God or responding to His “invitations.” One of life’s great paradoxes is this: ***The only way you will ever find adequate “answers” to the questions or issues that prevent you from reaching out to God or drawing closer to Him is by seeking Him. Because only God Himself can provide the answers you need to satisfy the fears and confusion preventing you from moving forward.*** And because God deeply understands you, He knows precisely what understanding and knowledge you require to resolve every vital question and concern. But there **are** good answers to each of your questions and doubts!

One of the foundational truths about creation is that mankind was created with the intelligence to recognize the inconsistencies and doubts that reside within them and the motivation to seek meaningful answers to the profound questions of life. Finding answers to these questions is a significant part of finding meaning and purpose. **You must accept personal responsibility for finding answers to the questions that prevent you from moving forward in fruitful ways – and God desires to assist you in that process.** No question is “off limits” – God desires to help you find meaningful answers to all of the essential questions of life. **He designed life to work that way!** **Pursuing meaningful answers to important life questions is the core of The Great Adventure!**

As you search for answers to the critical questions that arise in your mind, God will guide you to find the answers **you need**. That pattern must be followed because that’s how God designed life to be lived! All learning is the result of finding answers to questions. Each time you complete the process of finding an answer to a significant life question, you gain a deeper understanding of who God is, which enables you to enjoy a deeper relationship with Him. And each of these experiences helps you to develop greater confidence and trust in Him. **Your primary calling in life is to be a student – a truth seeker – searching for answers to the questions you believe are most important and allowing God to be your teacher and guide.** While there is probably an inexhaustible set of questions and answers, in the next chapter, I will present a set of truths established by God – foundational life principles – that will aid you in connecting with God in significant and personal ways.

If this discussion has been helpful, I'd like to let you know about a book I've written that explores this and other closely related topics in greater depth. The title of the book is: “Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment: Making Sense of God, Life, and Success.”

My goal in writing this book was to help people better understand how God designed life to be lived and what He expects from each of us. In its broadest sense, God designed life as a journey of discovery with Himself as our guide, counselor, and primary resource. You and I are called to be students of life with God as our teacher!

If you didn't enjoy going to school, let me assure you that having God as your life teacher will be substantially better than any previous educational experiences. God is not angry with you, He is not disappointed in you, and He will never pressure or embarrass you. He is genuinely a kind, loving, and supportive teacher – more so than any teacher, coach, counselor, or parent you have ever known. A big part of your life as a student is discovering how truly awesome God is!

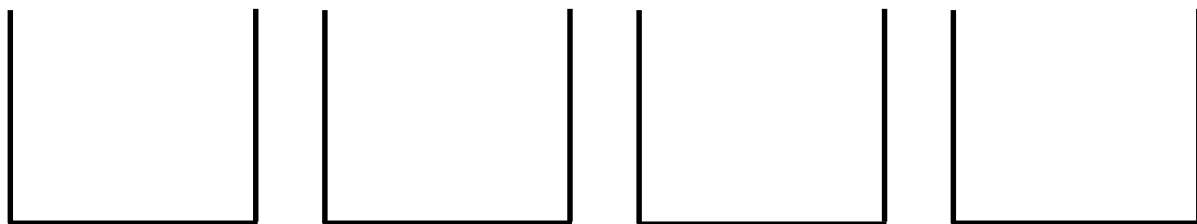
My book highlights the most important life principles God has established, guides readers in building and deepening their relationship with Him, and outlines ways to adjust their life practices to further God’s purposes in and through their lives. ***In short, my book addresses one central question: What is life really all about?***

Each of us recognizes that we are responsible for how we live our lives. We each must find answers to the most profound and important questions of life. But what are the most critical questions for which we must find answers?

As I reflected on my life experiences in the months leading up to my retirement from teaching and pastoring, the Holy Spirit helped me realize that everything of value I had ever learned was an answer to one or more of four questions. In my book, I refer to these as the “Four Essential Life Questions.”

1. Who Is God?
2. How Has God Designed Life to be Lived?
3. Who Am I?
4. What Is God Asking Me to Do?

What profoundly impacted me was the realization that as I have found answers to these Essential Questions over time, and followed God’s guidance to bring my life into alignment, meaning, purpose, and fulfillment have grown in my life. I believe that is how God wants to bring meaning, purpose, and fulfillment into your life as well.



Who Is God?

How has God
Designed Life to
be Lived?

Who Am I?

What is God
Calling Me to
Do?

The Essential Questions serve as containers. The more you fill these containers with answers and align your life accordingly, the more meaning, purpose, and fulfillment will grow. You will experience the “full life” Jesus died to secure for you as you allow God to reveal answers to the Essential Questions and then follow His guidance. The book also provides detailed guidance on how to incorporate the Essential Questions into your daily life.