

Which way do I go?

When we face the big decisions in life, we often just want someone smarter than us to tell us what to do! God does have a purpose for each of us, but God is not some big vending machine in the sky or a genie in a lamp that must be rubbed the right way to produce the answers we want. God created us for relationship with Himself, and He delights in drawing us closer to Him through the questions we ask and the answers He gives.

Warning: There are no easy answers ahead! No formulas or surprises, either. God does have some very specific things to say about how we can know His will for our lives; as always, it begins with communication. Ask! The better we know a friend, the easier it is to find a gift that will please that friend. The better we know God, the clearer His intentions and desires for us become.



The Right Path

1. Pray to know God's will—not to give a laundry list of things you want God to do! The One who loves us knows exactly what you need, so ask God to make His will your own. That's a terrifying prayer—one with the real possibility of changing our lives completely—but the only prayer that counts.

“Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.” Psalm 143:10

Jesus taught his followers to pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:9, 10

2. Imitate Jesus Christ—this means finding out who He is and what He has said and done. It means living with His words; and it means working on a living relationship with Him.



“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1, 2

3. Get and stay connected to the body of believers—the Church. By rubbing elbows (and rough edges) with others on the same path, we find the nourishment and the encouragement for the lifelong task of learning God's will.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:24, 25

4. Be willing to accept and act on what God makes clear.

The Apostle Paul said it best: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Romans 12:1, 2

What is God like? Is He trustworthy?



God meets our deepest needs when we trust Him!



Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Psalm 37: 3-6, 8 (Written by King David—a man whom God said was “after My own heart.”)

When people are cruel and things are terrible, God has big plans: He can take what seems to be great evil and from it create great good!

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish . . . the saving of many lives. Genesis 50:20 (Spoken by Joseph—20 years after his brothers betrayed him, threw him in a pit, and sold him as a slave. God made him second ruler of Egypt; Joseph saved Egypt, his brothers and his whole family from starvation.)

When trouble threatens, God's people need to turn their eyes and their attention on God. Praise God ahead of time for His solution—God can turn a terrible threat into a great blessing!

We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you. 2 Chronicles 20:12 (King Jehoshaphat's prayer as Israel faced attack from multiple armies.)

God forgives our sins. He heals us and redeems our lives from destruction. He sets His love and compassion over our spirits and satisfies us with good things so that we feel as strong as a soaring eagle!

Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. Psalm 103:2-5 (King David, listing the good things God does for us.)

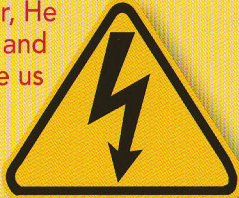
God is able to do more than we can ever dream through His power at work within us!

Now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. Ephesians 3:18-20 (The apostle Paul, at the end of a prayer for believers.)

No matter how bad things seem, God holds onto us—even when we're at our worst.

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will take me into glory. Psalm 73:21-24

Even when we feel threatened or are in danger, He holds us and can make us strong!



So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10 (God's words to Isaiah, a prophet in constant danger from the rulers of his day who didn't like the message from God he delivered to them.)

Jesus promises us life at its best—an incredibly good life that last forever, secure in Him.

I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. John 10:10, 11, 27 (Jesus' words.)

God can bring good out of anything—and He's proven that He's on your side!

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. . . . 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 8:28, 31, 32 (Paul, who had once despised Jesus and persecuted believers.)

If I have joined God's family and belong to Christ, the Bible tells me:

I am chosen and loved by God; therefore, I am loved more deeply than I can imagine! (Colossians 3:12; see 1 John 3:1)

I am forgiven of sin. God will continue to restore me when I repent. (1 John 1:9)

I am at peace with God, my Father; therefore, I can have peace in any situation. (Romans 5:1; see John 14:27)

I am God's own child; therefore, I have a new family. (John 1:12, Ephesians 1:5)

I am God's own creative work of art; therefore, I can be glad and grateful for the person God has made me to be. (Ephesians 2:10)

I am a new creation; the old life is gone; therefore, I am no longer a slave to old ways of thinking. (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:5-7)

I am a citizen of heaven; therefore, this world is not the end. I have a divine destination! (Philippians 3:20)

I am a child of the light, able to please the Lord; therefore, my heavenly Father is pleased as He watches me becoming more like Jesus. (Ephesians 5:8-10)

I am part of a royal priesthood and a nation that belongs to God; therefore, what the world says about me is not God's opinion of who I am. (1 Peter 2:9)

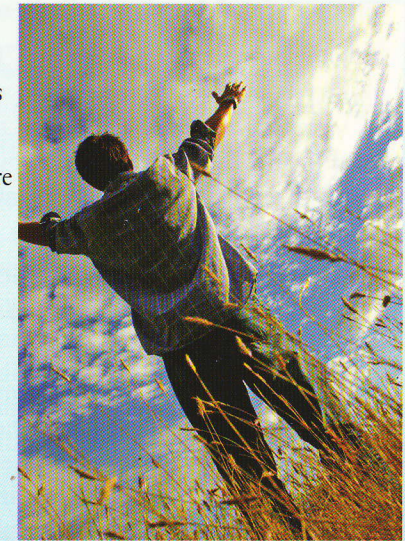
I am reconciled to God and I display God's reconciliation to others; therefore, I have a valuable role to play in God's work here on earth. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

I am able to give my worries to God, because He cares about me; therefore, I can rest in knowing that He will do what is best for me. (1 Peter 5:7)

God is for me, on my side, in my corner; therefore, nothing or no one can overcome the power of my Father! (Romans 8:31)

God is working everything in my life for my good and for His glory; therefore, when I am confused by circumstances, I trust His loving promise. (Romans 8:28)

God has prepared good things for me to do; therefore, I have important work to do—God has made me a part of His family business! (Ephesians 2:10)



What is God's will for me?

What the Bible says

The Bible contains many clear commands for us to follow, but here are a few that refer specifically to doing "God's will" just to get you started!



"It is God's will that you should be sanctified." 1 Thessalonians 4:3

God wants us to become more like Jesus every day—in our thoughts, our words and our deeds. But He doesn't expect us to do that on our own. (See Philippians 2:13.)

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

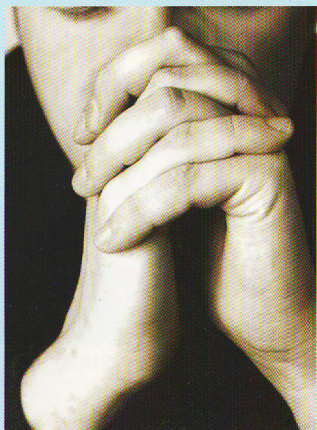
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

God wants His children to be joyful, thankful and prayerful people—even when the outward circumstances seem impossible! (See Ephesians 5:15-21.)

"For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men."

1 Peter 2:15

There will always be people who say negative things about us. But only by our good actions can we prove their words to be false. Doing what is good is the best way to please God while stopping the gossips! (See Titus 2:7, 8.)



"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised." Hebrews 10:36

God wants us to keep going and He offers great reward to those who don't give up—even when life is hard! (See Galatians 6:9, 10.)

"God uses suffering to call us into the peace of His presence. If God could not use pain and suffering for our good, then He would not allow such things to remain in the world.

"The grain of wheat must lie in the dark womb of the earth before it can be called forth into the open air by the light and the warmth of the sun. Then it grows into a healthy plant and bears fruit. God has no joy in our pain, but He sometimes uses pain and suffering as bitter medicines for the treatment of souls."

—SUNDAR SINGH

(Hindu convert to Christianity and one of the most influential missionaries of the 20th century)

What's the value of walking through painful circumstances?

God only allows a tough time for a good purpose.

When things hurt, when experiences come that we can only call "bad," it may not feel as though God wants the best for you. In all the pain, anger, and confusion, it is hard to remember that God loves and values you. He has great plans for you and does not want to destroy you!

Good Things that Can Come from Pain

We are "pruned" like a fruit tree so we can bear more spiritual fruit.

He [God] cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.
John 15:2

We can learn to obey God.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. Psalm 119:67

We can learn more about who God is.

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

We can learn to rely on God.



We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.
2 Cor. 1:8, 9

We have the opportunity to become more mature in our faith.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
James 1:4

Our generosity and joy during trouble can bless others.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.
2 Corinthians 1:3, 4

"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." Romans 8:28

Sarah worked for Josh—a harsh, demeaning man whose angry outbursts were heard throughout the building. She asked God for strength and help to let go of her anger toward Josh. Ten years later, Sarah was asked to do a job for which she would not have been prepared had she not been trained by Josh. In hindsight, Sarah could see God's good hand in Josh's being her boss.

Sometimes God asks us to do what we think we do not have strength to do. God is ready, willing and able to give us whatever we need, if we ask him (see Ephesians 3:14-21). He will give the strength moment by moment as we choose to trust Him enough to obey Him!

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."
—C.S. LEWIS, *The Problem of Pain*

Life-destroying lies that keep us from knowing God's will...and some truths to ponder

The Lie: God is punishing me.

The Truth: Everyone suffers sometimes. God lets us suffer to make us more mature.

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.
Hebrews 5:7-9

The Lie: God can never use me again; I'm disqualified for God's purposes.

The Truth: Satan loves to tell this lie because he wants you to give up. Remember that he comes to kill, steal and destroy (see John 10:9) but God is always ready to forgive. It doesn't matter how bad your life has been—if you give the failures to God, He will use you in a new way.

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."
Lamentations 3:19-24

The Lie: God is fed up with me.

The Truth: God is not like a human. He does not hold a grudge. His love for you is everlasting!

...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.
Philippians 1:6

The Lie: I'll never be happy again.

The Truth: When you have suffered a tragedy, you may feel as though hope is gone. But, in time, God will fill you with hope, joy and peace—as you trust in Him! His desire is for you to overflow with hope. He already gave you the power to do so, by His Spirit!

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
Romans 15:13



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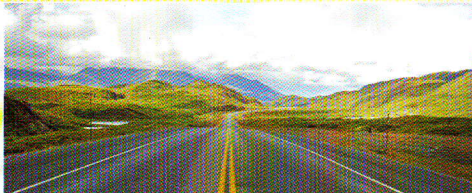
What do I need to remember about God's leading?

1. God wants you to know His will more than you want to know His will!

You don't need to second-guess God to find out what His will is. God will make sure you know it, whether through His Word, by circumstances, or by other ways. He confirms His will in ways that are unique to your personality, needs and situation.

However, even after you have prayed about the decision, you may feel tempted to agonize about it. Recognize that this is an "old pattern of thinking," because God tells us not to worry. Then work on changing the pattern: commit your way to the Lord through prayer (Psalm 37:5, Galatians 4:6)—every 5 minutes, if necessary! Rest in God. Be assured that He loves you and is eager to help you!

2. You won't miss God's plan if your heart is set on pleasing Him.



Chris believed she had received a call from God to work with Muslim women, but she didn't respond to a window of opportunity because of the difficulties involved. When the window closed, Chris was gripped by a fear that she had missed her opportunity to serve God.

A popular (but unbiblical) notion has circulated in church circles that one might somehow "miss God's will" and be "put on the shelf." The idea implies

that a person who missed a window of opportunity can never again be used by God, but must somehow settle for a "less-than-God's-will" life. This comes from our tendency to make God in our own image. God knows all about us—our strengths and weaknesses, our problems and worries—and "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

Ten years later, the same opportunity presented itself to Chris, and she snapped it up. This time she was really ready—besides being more mature in her faith, Chris had a great deal of complementary experience to help her in her calling.

3. God has perfect plans for imperfect people's lives.

Bill was a Christian but he was intimately involved with Denise, a non-Christian woman. When Bill's teenaged son announced that he intended to stay a virgin until he got married, Bill said that was great—he honored it, but it wasn't for him. Yet, over time, Bill's son's comment made him consider his own choices of hypocrisy and rationalization. Bill finally made the choice to end the relationship with Denise and become celibate. During his two years of celibacy, Bill spent a lot of time in prayer. After about two and a half years, a beautiful, bright Christian woman came into his life, and they were joined in a strong marriage.



If God loved and used only perfect people, there would be no one to love or to carry out His plans! God loves us, not because of our perfection or performance but because He is love! Even when we fail Him and the people around us, He longs for us to come to Him for forgiveness, love, and help.

Psalm 37:23, 24

"If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand."

"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." Jeremiah 29:11

4. God will give direction to anyone who asks.

You don't have to be a super-Christian to get divine guidance. Many religions claim to reveal hidden wisdom to those who follow all of their rules. God promises to tell you what to do if you ask him, trust Him, and follow His leading.

Hannah was struggling with a big life decision that needed to be made very quickly. She went to bed with her mind in turmoil, intending to skip her usual Bible reading in order to pray specifically about the issue at hand. As she began to pray (talking to God, not listening, of course!), the phrase, "Your Word is a

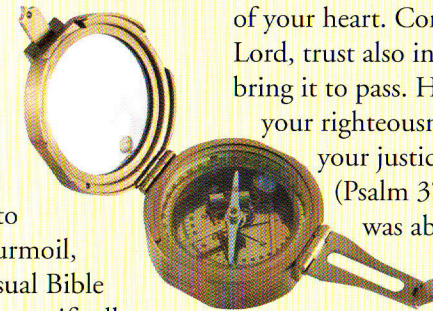
lamp to my feet and a light to my path" continually distracted her. Finally, she turned on the light, opened her Bible at its bookmark, and read a passage of Scripture that she understood as a message with particular application to her struggle.



"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." James 1:5

5. God knows the future, so we don't have to. We only need to know the next thing to do.

Melissa was in her 30s, unmarried and childless, with a serious, incurable disease. There were days when she despaired of God's goodness and her own lovability. One day she remembered one of her beloved father's favorite Bible passages: "Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday." (Psalm 37:3-6) Finally Melissa was able to "bloom where she was planted," turning her attention and talents to the needs of abused and neglected children in her community.



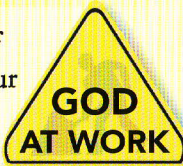
"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Matthew 6:33, 34

Relax in the knowledge that we are surrounded and carried in God's loving and capable arms. Only God knows for sure what will happen—and He has already guaranteed to make it work out for good! As one old song says, "I don't know about tomorrow but I know who holds tomorrow—and I know He holds my hand." Focus on doing well today the thing God has given you to do; make good plans, but then let God be God. He is completely able to take care of tomorrow.

6. God is always at work behind the scenes—and He has your best interests at heart!

Sometimes it feels as if God is silent or that our prayers bounce off the ceiling. But during those times, God is putting together circumstances in our lives that will bring the greatest good. He doesn't sleep; He doesn't take a vacation; He is always caring about you and working in your life.

Job said it this way: "When he is at work in the north, I do not see him, when he turns to the south, I catch no



glimpse of him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold." (Job 23:9-11)

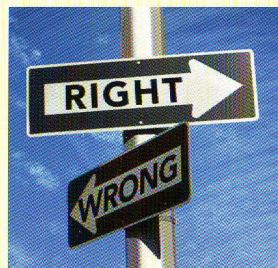
7. We can seldom choose our circumstances; we can always choose our attitudes.

While working on an attitude may seem trivial when you feel like you're drowning, you are actually giving God yet another opportunity to conform you to His will. When we are in a difficult or confusing situation, He urges us to choose an attitude of faith, of rest, of joy in Him (see 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Psychologist Victor Frankl survived a World War II concentration camp. Life was made as miserable as possible by vicious guards; however, Frankl noticed that some prisoners were happy, shared their bread allotment, and had kind words for others. When they were released, Frankl found that these "happy" prisoners had a higher survival rate than those who had focused on the deprivation of the camps. He concluded that no matter what is taken from a person, one always retains the ability to choose his or her attitude.

8. If the Bible forbids it, don't bother praying about it.

God won't lead you contrary to what He has already revealed in His Word. Cheating, stealing, adultery, gossiping, hating, resenting,



quarreling, lying, suing other Christians—these all are already listed in scripture as contrary to God's will.

Before you begin to rationalize ("It's not really as bad as those people say it is"), recognize that obeying God may be difficult. But God will give you strength to do it, if you will choose His way and obey.

9. God's timing is always perfect—not one moment early, not one day late. Give God time to work!

Sharon turned her face away from the friend holding a smiling baby. She'd had dozens of miscarriages. Sometimes she wondered if God hated her, if He were punishing her for some sin she could no longer remember. One day Sharon realized she had to choose to trust God in her pain. She chose to trust that He had something in store for her that she could not yet see, could not yet understand. Sharon and Dan became foster parents to a drug

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It can be very difficult to sit back and wait patiently when we desperately want to make something happen! Our culture constantly urges us to "do something." In Scripture, God often tells His people to "wait" or to "stand still" and see His salvation. Waiting takes courage to believe that He is at work—and it may be more difficult than "doing something for the Lord."

Henri Nouwen, a well-known writer, professor and speaker, felt called to leave a life of "doing something" to care for a brain-damaged young man whom others considered a vegetable. Here is some of what he learned:

"Patience is not waiting passively until someone else does something. Patience asks us to live the moment to the fullest, to be completely present to the moment, to taste the here and now, to be where we are. When we are impatient, we try to get away from where we are. We behave as if the real thing will happen tomorrow, later, and somewhere else. Be patient and trust that the treasure you are looking for is hidden in the ground on which you stand."

Psalm 27:14

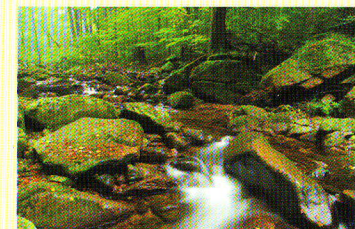
Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

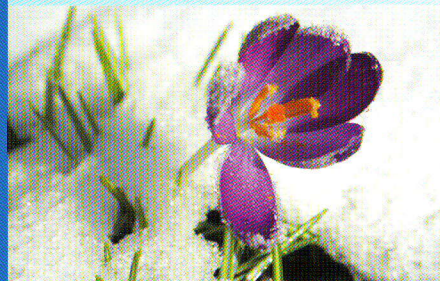
Psalm 37:7

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

baby, whom they named Joshua. They began to talk about adoption. Soon, they found that Joshua had a cousin a year older who was also available! Now there was a family of four—and a year later, Joshua's biological mother gave birth again. His sister came into Dan and Sharon's family.

In the midst of diapers and tricycles today, Sharon will tell you that trusting God was not always easy. But God was preparing her for this raucous, delightful family she never before could have imagined!



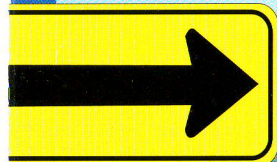


God is the God of second chances.

People may tell us that we have ruined our life and destroyed hope for anything good. That is not true. When we are in despair and think our lives are shattered, it is at that very point where God can finally enter in and

roll up His sleeves to do something wonderful! When we ask God to take control of the situation, He will walk us through that situation into the next one, and we'll begin to realize that He is always able to do more than we can imagine!

David was God's choice for Israel's king and one whom God declared to be "a man after His own heart." But David seduced Bathsheba, wife of one of his most loyal army officers. David had her husband killed in battle and married the "grieving widow." God sent Nathan the prophet to confront David and David repented (see Psalm 51). God forgave their sin. Even though the child born to David and Bathsheba died, God restored the couple and made them parents of the great King Solomon, whose descendant was Jesus Christ. (See 2 Samuel 11, 12.)



1. No matter what you have done, **God loves you and is eager to forgive you.**

All you have to do is ask.

Nothing is too big for God to forgive.

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

1 John 1:9

2. **God will restore a humble heart.** Accept the consequences of doing wrong. You might need to pay back some money, apologize to someone, pay a fine or penalty, regain another person's trust, or correct a problem that you helped to create. Even if it means admitting you were wrong and feeling embarrassed, these important steps must be taken to fully obey God and learn to live in peaceful obedience.

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. Psalm 25:9

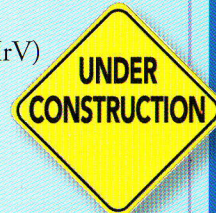
The Lord hates two things. He hates it when the guilty are set free. He also hates it when those who aren't guilty are punished.

Proverbs 17:15

3. Even if you have given up on yourself, **God does not give up on you.** Throughout Scripture, the Lord begs his people to turn away from wrong and come back to him. If we choose not to obey God and go our own way, he pursues us. But He never gives up on us—even when we foolishly insist on doing things our own way and choose to disobey him. He may allow us to deal with the fallout of our disobedience, but He stays nearby, waiting to hear us call! When we finally stop fighting, acknowledge our sin and call out to Him, He comes with open arms to give us what we need most—Himself. He's a good Father!

Don't just tear your clothes to show how sad you are. Let your hearts be broken. Return to the Lord your God. He is gracious. He is tender and kind. He is slow to get angry. He is full of love. He takes pity on you. He won't destroy you.

Joel 2:13 (NIRV)



4. God may change a painful situation quickly; however, **His goal for you is to sanctify you—to make you like Jesus**—developing you into a loving, giving, mature person. These lifelong changes take time. The Christian life is much more like running a marathon than it is like sprinting a short distance. This life is the process that prepares us for the next one! So settle in for the long haul—when you fall down, don't give up! Get back up and keep running—even if you limp for a while!

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith . . .

Hebrews 12:1, 2

5. **God invests time and effort to find lost people.** If you have lost your way in life and have gone in the wrong direction, there is good news—God is looking for you! He considers you too valuable to lose. Don't push him away when he calls to you.

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. Matthew 18:12-14

Hudson Taylor (pioneer missionary) used to say, "Man's extremity [being at the end of our rope] is God's opportunity."