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Most importantly, I must thank God - my Heavenly Father, the 'Son' without whom the wonderful gift of salvation we can choose to accept today would not exist, and the Spirit who guides and instructs me. Without them, there'd be no point in writing this very intimate conversation whereby I sincerely hope to answer your sensitive and important questions. No God, no need for right or wrong. And if no need to navigate those murky waters should exist, then who would care what we do or why? So, I thank my god for truth that helps me understand what's good and right, and what's wrong – rebellious – *sinful*. I assure you I'll be eternally grateful, and I'm honored to pass what I've learned to you in the form of answers to your questions.

Second, I must thank all of you who've asked tough questions and suffered through the agony of silence until now. There's an inherent tendency in today's Christian culture to mask the ugly reality of life and therefore squelch the natural questions and cries for help. Regardless, you've endured and found a way to pursue your quest for knowledge and practical steps for putting God's wisdom to work in your life. Well done! Your questions and the answers that follow will put His wisdom and ways to work in the lives of countless people for a long time to come. And, not to overstate the obvious, this document would be impossible to create without your input. I'm very grateful to everyone who shared their thoughts and questions with me.

To Joanne, my beautiful wife of nearly 30 years: your support and encouragement have certainly given me the strength to move forward with what has proved to be a daunting and tenuous task. You've been a great sounding board and my first line of defense in making sure that what I've written is readable and understandable. What a blessing you are – not only to me but those around you. My love for you is immeasurable, and I'm looking forward to working with you on the many projects we've discussed and about which we've prayed.

To my daughter Tiffany: thank you for believing in me and what I'm doing, and for your willingness to continue to review my works despite your busy schedule. I appreciate you and your feedback and love you very much. May God richly bless you and your family!

I must also thank my close friend and pastor, Ron Almberg. He, Joanne, and Tiffany were instrumental in the success of my first publication, *Finding the End of the World*, and Ron has continued to provide excellent scriptural accountability and valuable mentoring. There's no way I could've accomplished any of my writing projects including this one without his help. Ron: I'm humbled by your gracious and helpful nature, and wish all the best for you and your family. You're an incredible blessing and man of God!

To all who've joined me in this venture: I love each of you from the bottom of my heart and applaud your desire for truth and righteousness. You're a great example to many including me!

*The LORD bless you, and keep you;  
The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you;  
The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.*

With heartfelt gratitude and best wishes,

Ron Braley

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## **FOREWORD**

*“Why do bad things happen to good people? For instance, my mom died of cancer. Why did God take her away from me?”*

*“Does the Bible say we can’t drink alcohol?”*

*“Ron – I don’t see anything in the New Testament about tithing. And aren’t we free from the Law? Is there a requirement to do it?”*

*“Do I have to obey those in authority over me – even when I disagree with them?”*

*“Is hell a real place? I mean, why would a good god make people go there if so?”*

*“I don’t understand the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Would you please explain those things?”*

*“What does being ‘saved’ mean? Do we get to go to heaven just by saying a particular prayer?”*

*“Is homosexuality wrong? What about things like masturbation? How do I pursue sexual purity?”*

*“Some people don’t celebrate Christmas and Easter. Where did these holidays come from, and why do some people not celebrate them?”*

The questions above represent a mere sampling of what people have asked me throughout my years as a follower of the Christ, an author, and as a new pastor. I’ve asked some of them myself during my journey to find God and righteousness. The truth is that we all wonder about many if not most of the same things at one time or another and they all boil down to one main theme: effectively applying God’s guidance and commandments in our lives without regard for religion or man’s wisdom. The ability to do that will help us navigate right and wrong and greatly increase our chances of not rebelling (intentionally or otherwise) against God and His ways.

We understand that the consequence of that rebellion – *sin* – will be incredible punishment and death (more on that later). My sincere desire is to help us avoid that end. Together, through your questions and my responses along with a solid scriptural foundation, we’ll paint a clearer picture of the path we’re to follow to steer clear of God’s wrath that will come upon the rebellious (and therefore the disobedient) at the end of this age.

Until death or the return of Jesus, we must make choices that will affect us and our relationships with humanity, God, and the Christ. Your questions suggest a potential desire to make right choices. But what’s right? What’s wrong? Who decides? We must, and will, answer these three questions in great detail first.

Choices are intentional thoughts or actions. Whether one hasn’t yet been carried out doesn’t matter – the choice is right or wrong, righteous or rebellious, helpful or harmful. We make them hundreds of times a day as we move forward through life. Most aren’t harmful or sinful, but

some are, and each is intended to accomplish a goal. As we'll learn, our intention is crucial to making right choices and understanding whether an action will indeed be right or wrong.

Also important to remember as we learn to navigate right and wrong and explore answers to many of life's questions is that we're a complex creature composed of flesh *and* spirit. In a perfect world, a spirit knowledgeable of God's ways and obedient to them and in communication with His Spirit would control the body made of flesh, blood, bone, chemistry, and electricity. Unfortunately, this isn't a perfect world and things usually work the other way around – desires of the body and mind coupled with a lack of solid faith squelch the spirit and risk running us off a proverbial cliff. We shouldn't ignore the needs of the body, just manage them.

Since we're beings of flesh, chemistry, and electricity, we need to be involved in a variety of regular activities such as eating, sleeping, drinking, and sex. Natural emotions and cravings we must deal with include anger, joy, happiness, sadness, despair, depression, lust, love, hunger, thirst, and so-on. Unfortunately, our Christian culture tends to ignore or negatively classify many of those natural feelings and needs as 'sinful' instead of helping Jesus' followers effectively manage them. We need to understand the spiritual guidelines (God's, not man's) with which to manage our emotions, needs, and intents with the ultimate goal of applying those guidelines in making consistent, righteous decisions.

The previous paragraphs bring us full-circle and offer a great segue into an introduction to our Q&A sessions. Thank you again for joining me as we become more knowledgeable about God, His Christ, and His Spirit and the true natures of sin and intent as we present your questions and appropriate responses.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

My first task after deciding to compile your questions and then respond was to create a standard format. I believe that a common template will help make the questions and answers easier to understand and internalize.

Two necessary components of the template, of course, are questions and answers. But there has to be more than that. For instance, the context from whence the question originated is critical to giving an appropriate response and understanding how to apply anything God has had to say on a particular subject. I also figured that a short answer, list of Scripture references, and a summary would round things out and aid in overall comprehension and application. Toward that end, I've built the following template and used it to format every question and corresponding answer:

- **Question:**
- **Consideration/Context:**
- **Short Answer:**
- **Scriptural References:**
- **Explanation:**
- **Summary:**

The underlying agenda of this study is to look solely to Scripture and as the final authority so that where it's silent or vague in giving specific commands or principles, the conclusions by these studies will still reflect biblical principles. As such, I'll base all answers in this book on "what Scriptures say" and not on any church doctrines, philosophies or human-made responses. For a debate outside of Scripture that includes different church teachings and philosophical ideas, the reader would need to research the appropriate resources.

You'll find that I've divided this Q&A document into three parts as follows:

1. **PART ONE: LAYING THE FOUNDATION – NAVIGATING RIGHT & WRONG**
2. **PART TWO: STUFF ABOUT LIFE & OUR FELLOW MAN/WOMAN**
3. **PART THREE: STUFF ABOUT RELIGION OR GOD**

**PART ONE** will give you a very good understanding of sin and its main components - generally either **ignorance** or **unrighteous intent**. In this section, we'll also discuss the two entities constantly vying for attention: flesh and spirit. Both exist, and we must tend to them. An imbalance (e.g., allowing the desires of the flesh to override the direction of the spirit constantly) will bring certain destruction; understanding their nature and how to manage them will greatly aid in staying on a right course to God and His Christ. We'll offer tips for doing just that.

Since many of your questions are related to God, salvation, the church, or religion in general, I've also contrasted God's wisdom and man's in this section. I'm an ordained pastor but will be the first to confess that religion can be harmful and today's Christian culture does more to entertain than create disciples and equip Jesus' followers. The Church, shrouded in the veils of business and religion, looks nothing like the simple assembly of followers from nearly 2,000 years ago. We'll rip away those veils and focus only on Jesus' commandments and God's ways as we seek to understand not only your questions but the right responses to them.

**PART TWO** attempts to compile and answer your questions about life in general. They deal with a wide variety of topics directly related to the needs of flesh and its emotion with a goal of helping the reader manage them effectively and righteously (rather than the other way around!). We all have natural desires. When do they become sinful? Sexual desire is a great example: without sexual desire, there'd be no interest in multiplying. So, the desire itself is a good thing. Because our programming doesn't limit sexual desire to an individual but rather causes us to focus on physical features or the pleasure of sex itself, we must exercise self-control. We must do this to ensure we don't rebel against God and His ways by allowing that natural desire to lead to something counter to His intent.

In this section, you'll also learn about judging others and the truth behind having relationships with non-Christians. For example, do you know that followers of Jesus are indeed to judge other followers and yet not judge those who aren't His? Or, even though we must have relationships with non-followers to be obedient to Jesus and get through life, that we must not join with them in relationships that can drag us down spiritually or cause destruction – such as business partnerships or marriage? You'll learn the background and rationale for these statements when we explore the foundational questions later.

**PART THREE** presents a great number of questions and answers related to God, the Christ, the Spirit, the Church, and Christian religion/culture. Through it, I hope to not only answer your questions effectively but also provide a very clear and concise roadmap for salvation through faith and the resulting obedience to Jesus' commandments. We'll strip away religious pomp and circumstance and label man's wisdom to allow us to differentiate it from God's.

We'll explore the origin of humanmade rites, rituals, and holidays. You'll walk away with an understanding of where today's Bible came from and of its inconsistencies and the causes. We'll also clearly define salvation, which is something that's often misunderstood and abused. You'll learn about the Holy Spirit and His gifts along with everything related to tithing – something else misunderstood and grossly abused in the Church. Nothing will be avoided, left out, or manipulated as we venture down the road of discovery. And, all responses will rely heavily on the Word of God that came through prophets, eyewitnesses, or the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit.

On the subject of Scriptures, you may be asking yourself, "Which Bible translation should I use when reading the references?" I encourage the use of the King James Bible or NASB (New American Standard Bible) and discourage use of the NIV (New International Version) Bible. All Scriptures quoted in this book came from the NASB unless otherwise noted, and will be italicized. Boldfacing in Scripture quotes was applied solely by me to highlight topics or specific points.

Use what you feel comfortable with, but please know there are differences between translations; the NIV, in my opinion, and that of others, contains significant omissions and modifications that could negatively affect your study. The cause may be an intention to focus more on thought and concept as opposed to just translating text that's as close to the original as possible without extensive interpretation. You'll have no trouble finding examples if you look



for them – especially through Internet searches. To be fair, though, you’ll uncover challenges with most if not all translations of biblical texts. I counter this issue by comparing multiple translations when researching important issues. You may wish to do the same. I can’t imagine the agony translators experience when trying to convert writings (especially ancient ones!) into equivalent meanings in other languages. Cross-examining English texts can give a person a better understanding of what the source is trying to communicate.

The Bible refers to additional texts. Two of these are the Book of the Upright (Jashar) and the Book of Enoch. While they didn’t end up in our modern canonical Bible, they can still be useful. Why do I refer to them on occasion? They often fill in blanks or answer questions regarding topics about which our Bible offers scant or no information. Because the Bible refers to them, they’re at least somewhat credible (in my opinion). Let’s explore how we’ll use the Bible and additional texts.

We’ll take a literal approach when applying the Scriptures referenced in my responses, considering them in context and taking them at face value whenever possible. The approach is very important to understanding the writer’s (and therefore God’s) intent. Too often we insert into a piece of Scripture our interpretation or context – frame of reference – attempting to answer the unfortunate question, “*What does this verse mean to me?*” Please don’t do that! More important than our interpretation of His message is getting His intended instructions right and applying them in our life, which can be a matter of life and death after all.

Speaking of life and death, let’s end the introduction and give birth to our journey together through your inquiries and God’s answers.