

Hope Through the Truth

Standing in the Gap in America

Stanley Holstein



Hope Through the Truth—Standing in the Gap in America.
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Introduction

Is something significant missing from my spiritual life?

I don't recall giving much consideration to this question as a teenager or young adult. My attention was focused on the task or activity at hand. In retrospect, I now realize I spent a considerable amount of time searching for one thing or another through the years. As a teenager I went camping often. Before each trip, I would check my backpack to ensure I had all the necessities for my outing. Later, as a young man, I worked for a house builder. At the end of each workday, we would search the area to locate the tools we had been strewn about the jobsite. This pattern continued throughout my career. As a businessman, I would often travel for five days at a time. I would double check my luggage to ensure I had packed all the necessary clothing and work materials required for the trip. In each of these instances and many others, whether at work or play, I was searching, not so much for what I had gathered but for any necessary thing that might be missing. I didn't consider myself prepared for the task at hand until I determined nothing important was missing.

If such a question and concept is so important to my physical life, it seems it would also be important to my spiritual life. Whether we consider ourselves "religious" or not, we all have a soul, a spiritual aspect to our being. An entire library of books, articles, and videos has been produced on this topic, addressed to people of every spiritual persuasion. I have read a quote, credited to different persons, that says, "The two greatest days in your life are the day you were born and the day you discover the reason you were born."

So, is something significant missing from my spiritual life? This is a valid question for me at any time because I can always improve. Depending on when I answer this question, the response will vary. In some days or seasons, more is missing. At other times, less is missing. On rare, brief occasions I may conclude that nothing is missing. This question is directed at me! Since I believe the Holy Bible is the one flawless, eternal truth, I must admit at the outset that examining this issue is a scary proposition given my sinful nature. Scripture tells me God observes, examines, and tests me. It also instructs me to examine and test myself by regularly looking in the mirror, God's Word, to determine if I am walking according to my faith. Through this process the Holy Spirit will highlight those areas of my spiritual life that need improvement. The beauty is, I will be the only human involved in this process. God won't be waiting to scold, accuse, or condemn me for my shortcomings either. He wants me to improve and succeed. So, after my self-assessment, the ensuing conversation will only be between God and me. No one else! It's personal!

Is it time for you to take a long look in the mirror? Is now a good time to ask yourself if anything significant is missing from your spiritual life? Some may say, "I don't believe in God as Creator or the Bible as truth." That is certainly your prerogative. Each person determines what they accept as truth. Others may say, "I do believe in God and the Bible. I am operating squarely within God's will." If this is true of your life, may God continue to bless you mightily in your service to the kingdom of heaven. Most folks I know fall somewhere in between these two examples. Either they have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, or they have but are still trying to determine God's plan for their lives. Back to the initial question once again. For

me and many others, the answer is “Yes” or “I’m not sure.” Either of these answers presents us with no less than three additional questions.

- What significant thing is missing from my spiritual life?
- What is my specific purpose in life?
- What is truth?

The answers to these questions have eternal implications. In the following pages, I provide answers from God’s Word as I understand it. My attempt to write has already proven profitable for me. It has served as an extended journaling exercise, producing some eye-opening realizations. I have considered and tried to answer honestly, for myself, every question posed in these pages. Some of my responses were far from flattering. Yet, I believe God will bless me if I am bold enough to make the necessary effort to correct the shortcomings he has shown me. So far, this has been a convicting, cathartic, and mobilizing trek. Still, it is far from over. Will you join me? I hope so. Difficult journeys don’t produce quite as much anxiety if you have company along the way. I’m convinced the venture will be profitable for each of us, if we dare. Should you decide to make this trek, God won’t be waiting to scold, accuse, or condemn you for your shortcomings either. He wants you to improve and succeed. So, after your self-assessment, the ensuing conversation will only be between you and God. No one else! It’s personal!

Chapter 1

A Blessed Life

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7)

Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. The Holy Bible is God's "owner's manual" for me. God's Word tells me everything I need to know about living here on earth. It tells me the reason I was born, my purpose for being, how I should live, why I should live in his prescribed manner, and where I will spend eternity. Some may ask, "How did you get to this place in your life? By what path or process did you arrive at these decisions?" Both are good questions. Let's start at the beginning.

A Firm Foundation

God has blessed me mightily throughout my life. I was born the second of four children in the hills of West Virginia to parents who were both Christians. At the time of my birth, Dad was a full-time telephone lineman and a full-time Baptist preacher as well. Mom was a devoted homemaker. Dad served twice as the pastor of small churches. He wasn't an educated man, but he studied the Word of God diligently. As a result, the Holy Spirit rewarded Dad with a solid understanding of Scripture and the ability to bring God's Word to life with power.

Dad had two passions, evangelism and singing. He would travel to small towns in West Virginia to preach. Most of these towns had a church building that they used for church services but no pastor. He also took vacations from work to preach at revivals. Sometimes he would take me with him. If a visiting minister or missionary came into town, a welcome bed was waiting at our house. Prayer and Bible study were integral parts of our home life. Dad also sang in a Christian quartet. Anne, my sister, played piano and sang with another Christian group. You might say I was born into the church. If the church doors were open, our family was there. So, my earliest memories were of a loving family devoted to the Lord, each other, and the body of believers.

Mom and Dad were content with their lot in life. They had peace and joy. They didn't complain, at least not to us children, about the worries of the world. As a child, I didn't necessarily connect their contentment and joy with their faith in God, but there was one thing I did learn early in life about my parents' relationship with the Lord. It came from conversations they had between themselves or with fellow believers that weren't directed to me. They loved God and his Son, Jesus. Mom and Dad talked about and acted as if God and Jesus Christ were real. It seemed my parents knew them personally because they did. Early in life I learned that God was real, he loved me, and Jesus died for my sins.

Another powerful impact they had on me at an early age was how their love of God translated into love for others. They treated the crippled and the poor with friendship and dignity, giving help as they were able. Folks who came to our house in need never left with money, but they always left with food or clothing. If they happened to stop by at mealtime, they were invited to eat with us. Mom and Dad understood the powerful witness of engaging others with acceptance and respect. Every person they met was a believer who needed encouragement or a lost soul who needed to see the love of God.

When I was very young, one particular man would come to our house with some regularity. Sometimes we would come home, and he would be sitting outside the house waiting for us. Once we got inside, Mom would ask, “Would you like me to run you some bath water?” He would always accept. He would bathe, eat, visit for a while, and then leave. Dad would offer to give this man a ride wherever he was going. I don’t recall him ever accepting the offer. Mom and Dad took God’s two greatest commandments seriously, to love God and to love other people. They didn’t just tell me about God’s love. Most importantly, they showed me his love. They desired their children to choose to love God too. Such a foundation was priceless to me, making an eternal impact.

Some other relatives and a number of family friends had seemingly mastered loving others. One in particular was Uncle Arthur, known to us as Ott. His words, actions, and demeanor exuded love, peace, and acceptance. I can never remember Ott speaking negatively about another person. Nor did I ever see a child who wouldn’t go to him the first time they met him. I am certain almost everyone who spent time with Ott felt his love for and acceptance of them. They felt his genuine desire to be in their presence and viewed themselves as more valued than they did before they met him. We all want and need that.

My friend, Jeff, told me about his childhood memory of Arlie, a mature Christian, who was approaching seventy years of age. Jeff remembered Arlie as a quiet, gentle, peaceful Christian who never said or did anything wrong. One day, Jeff overheard someone asking where they could find Arlie. The reply was “Oh, he’s probably out back humming himself to death.” Arlie’s joy in the Lord exuded from his very being without him having to say a word. He made a tremendous impression on a young man through his consistent demeanor of love.

The peace and joy exhibited by Ott, Arlie, and others like them made them different from most people. True peace and joy only come from one source: God’s indwelling Holy Spirit. It cannot be mimicked by those who don’t have the Holy Spirit. Many people may exhibit earthly happiness and contentment, but these are temporary conditions at best. People who truly love the Lord possess something significantly distinct from most other humans even if we are unsure of what the “something” is. When they speak or show God’s love to us, we tend to listen.

Two Mysteries of Grace

I am so thankful I was born into a Christian household. However, I had my own bull-headed ideas about life as I grew up. I was not attempting to live for the Lord when I left Mom and Dad’s home to establish my own. Yet, God continued to reinforce the foundational teachings of

faith I had learned as a boy from Mom, Dad, and others. He accomplished this through what I now call the “two mysteries of grace,” which I will explain shortly.

God has revealed mysteries to those who believe in him. These include the gospel message, Jesus Christ, and Christ living in those who believe. The unsaved do not comprehend these things. The New Testament speaks of several fundamental, life-changing mysteries involving God’s will regarding the redemption of humanity, Jesus’s role in redemption, and those who may receive God’s grace.

- “He [God] made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:9–10).
- “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:4–6).

Jesus Christ, during his brief walk on this earth according to God’s plan:

- Provided a pathway for all humanity to be reconciled (restored to right relationship) to God rather than being condemned to everlasting destruction for breaking his law;
- Extended the offer of redemption to every person, not just the Jews; and
- Prepared a small group of humans to proclaim the gospel message to the world after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Only a comparatively few people, most of whom were living in and around the Middle East in the first century, understood the significance of Jesus’s death or the message of his ragtag group of followers known as Christians. For most of the first-century world, Jesus Christ remained a mystery. Twenty centuries later, I have my own mysteries about God and Jesus to unravel. For twenty-six years I have been blessed to have the privilege of walking with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. As I have journeyed with the Lord, God has faithfully placed believers in my life to help me along the way. After all these years, I accept God’s plan for my life, even the parts I don’t fully understand. Two of those things that I appreciate most I call the “two mysteries of grace.” They amaze me as much today as the day I committed my life to Jesus Christ.

First, God knew before the beginning of the world every decision I would make, every sin I would commit, and the price he would have to pay to bring me into a right relationship with him. Yet, God still sent his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to die for me. I don’t quite get it. The Creator died for an ungrateful creation, me, so I might have life eternal with him. If I were God, having all power and control, I would have devised a plan of redemption that didn’t require my Son to die. (This is just one of a million differences between God and me.)

God designed his plan to meet every requirement of his perfect holiness and justice under his law to redeem me (pay the debt for my sins) while at the same time proving to me how much he loves me. So, God paid the greatest possible price for my redemption through the sacrifice of

Jesus Christ. I understand Jesus gave his life for everyone's sins, but I'm only talking about my sins right now. Some two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ left his Father's side in heaven, wrapped himself in skin and bone, walked this earth, lived a sinless life, and then allowed himself to be tortured, crucified, and separated from his Father while dying on a cross in my place for my sins. If I were the only person who ever chose to live for the Lord, Jesus would still have come to earth. He did all that for me. It's personal!

Second, God gave me life, knowing I would choose to reject Jesus for decades. After giving me life, God could have allowed me to die while I was lost in my sins, which is exactly what I deserved. In fact, there were at least a couple of times when I came close to dying, and should have died, while lost. Instead, God protected me in my rebellion while placing one Christian after another in my sinful path to befriend me and point me toward Jesus. The Holy Spirit convicted me, and I finally gave my life to Christ. As if he hadn't done enough already, God continued to pour more Christians into my life after I was saved. Once again, God chose to prove to me that he doesn't want me or anyone else to be separated from him eternally. So, he chose me and pursued me while utilizing an enormous amount of precious human resources in the process. It's personal!

Some may say this shouldn't be a mystery since Scripture explains to us, in different ways and through numerous passages, exactly what God did and why he did it. Yet, I continue to struggle to comprehend it completely. I would like to be able to say I understand God's lavish, perfect love for me, but I don't—not really. My human mind doesn't have the capacity to truly understand agape (God's pure) love. What kind of God is willing to die for his own creation who rejected him? Great question! A God who is loving beyond description, among other things. One thing I can state with certainty is I am eternally grateful to God, who called me and placed his Holy Spirit within me, and to Jesus, who gave his life for me.

I like the way Francis Chan describes his relationship with God. Regarding the origin of the title for his book, *Crazy Love*, Francis says, "The idea of *Crazy Love* has to do with our relationship with God. . . It's probably the most insane statement you could make to say that the eternal Creator of this universe is in love with me. There is a response that ought to take place in believers, a crazy reaction to that love."¹ I find it very encouraging to know other people who love the Lord, know his Word, and are willing to admit they also struggle with the sheer enormity of God's grace.

- Randy Allen, senior minister at Bethel Church of Christ in Ada, Ohio, while preaching a series on Hosea, described God's grace as "scandalous, outrageous, and relentless" as God pursued an undeserving people.
- Francis Chan explains his struggle humbly and simply in *Crazy Love*, saying, "Heavenly Father, thank You for Your grace. Your forgiveness is SO good that I struggle with believing it at times. Thank You for rescuing me from myself and giving me Your Holy Spirit. Your love is better than life."²

I have accepted these "two mysteries of grace" as I call them, God's grace and his continual pursuit of me using all available resources, even though I don't fully understand either. While thinking about the many Christians that God chose to place in my path and those who were

most influential in my decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, I came to the following conclusions.

- Many of these people were a generation or more older than me.
- All these people desired an intimate relationship with me.
- All these people cared about my well-being here on earth and eternally.

In hindsight it is clear to me that God was utilizing Christians to guide me in my adult life as he had used Mom and Dad to guide me in my formative years. He was also giving me examples of the future role he desired me to adopt to serve him in the lives of others after my conversion.