

Foundational Basics about Growth of Our Spirits To Become More like Jesus and Prepare for Heaven

Our spirits are the essential part of who we are deep inside of ourselves. When we die and leave our bodies behind, we want our spirits to be as ready for heaven as possible. That means letting God change us to be as much like Jesus as possible with the time we have left.

We must put effort into the transformation of our spirits into the likeness of Jesus Christ. While God will do most of the work, we are called to cooperate by letting the Holy Spirit work in us to more and more live the way God wants us to live.

Faith together with other Christians is the vehicle for facing life's challenges and becoming more like Jesus. We develop our spirits further into His likeness and prepare for heaven together with other believers, especially our closest Christian friends and relatives, what I call a believer's Christian Inner Circle.

I have identified from the Bible 65 things that God wants Christians to do together, and all of them provide the means to become more and more like Jesus and prepare for heaven in one way or another. I call these the 65 Togethers of Scripture.

Sometimes difficult and unwanted challenges of living come our way. God uses them to purify our spirits and develop us for heaven. However, God does not want us to face these challenges of life alone. Church attendance is insufficient to face all the difficulties that come our way. So, when the Bible tells us how to handle life, it is almost always with those Christians with whom we have the most trust and regular contact. Our Christian Inner Circles include our closest Christian friends and family members, and it is with them that we can more completely obey the desires of God and deal with life and its troubles. Guided by the Bible and implementing the Togethers to handle difficulties changes us to be more like Jesus Christ.

Love for one another is the rule for the kingdom of God, both here and in heaven. The 65 Togethers of Scripture are all ways to grow in this more comprehensive love. This *Getting Ready to Go Home to Heaven* curriculum will help you advance in each of these 65 ways of God's kind of love before you die and enter heaven. This will usually be loving, in one way or another, those with whom we face life regularly, those in our Christian Inner Circles.

Sometimes those Christians we are closest to will help us obey the Scriptures from which the 65 Togethers come. At other times, doing the Togethers with one another will require that our thoughts, emotions, and actions change to be those like Jesus.

At the moment of our salvation, God made us new creations with spirits that can overcome our old ways and begin to change by the power of the Holy Spirit into the persons we are to become in Christ. The job of this new self is "to put on Christ," shedding what is not like Jesus as quickly as we can because there is so little time before heaven and so much transformation possible.

In so many ways, to become like Jesus we need to be surrounded by evil as He was when He lived here.

That is where Jesus displayed His character and holiness, so, in the environment of evil and disbelief is where we have to develop our spirits, who we are deep inside.

The process of God changing us more and more into the likeness of His Son Jesus is called sanctification. Sanctification prepares us for heaven, so that when we enter heaven, we will all have grown to higher levels of maturity in various aspects of spiritual holiness.

Using the allegory of a scale from 1 to 10, some of us will have reached a level of 4 in our spirit's ability to submit to God's will. Others will have reached 8 due to more cooperation with the sanctification process empowered by the Holy Spirit. In heaven, the saint with a spiritual power of 4 on submission to God will be completely satisfied. His or her sense of submission will be full, to the level of 4, and there will be no sadness or disappointment because that is the way it is in heaven. Yet, the saint with a capacity of 8, however it will apply to life in heaven, will have a spirit more able to submit to God.

What this means is that we cannot cruise along lazily in our faith and the moment we pass through heaven's gates catch up with someone who, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, developed her or his spirit to a greater degree in spiritual strengths. The Apostle Paul writing to the church in Phil 2:12-13 tells us that it is God who works in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. While God works in us to do those things that make us more like Jesus and more ideal for citizenship in heaven, we must cooperate with obedient effort.

A person who lifts heavy rocks all day will be stronger than a person who does little lifting. The heavy resistance will have created more muscle. It is like this with spiritual growth. Growing our spirits into Christ's likeness now is actually accelerated because it has to go against the opposition of sin, evil and troubles. As an example, a saint who was persecuted and held in a Chinese jail, later in heaven will have a stronger trust in God than a citizen of heaven who lived comfortably.

There are ways our spirits will grow in heaven that do not require the opposition of sin. There, we will not be overcoming sin to become more holy. Many wonderful areas of holiness will blossom in each of us. For example, the beauty in heaven will grow our appreciation of God's marvelous creativity.

But, there are many aspects of our spirits that will grow only now, only against the opposition of evil. When we overcome sinful thoughts, feelings, and actions, our spirits grow in purity to be more like Jesus.

God guides each of us through a unique development plan which includes our own situations of life. Scripture instructs us on how to deal with those challenges. Through the process of obeying the Bible's teachings, each of us will find our spirits changed, first into the image of Jesus and then molded specifically for our destined place of service in heaven.

To allow God to change us, we must avoid thinking that we are presently very much like Jesus. It would be unfortunate to go to heaven with minimal likeness to our Lord just because we did not want to admit our shortcomings. Recognizing that Jesus is superior opens up unlimited opportunities to continually grow spiritually. We need humility. Before we say to ourselves, "I do that!", we need to ask, "Do I do that to the extent Jesus did?"

God's grace is special to us particularly because we are "not okay". Being "not okay" is not dangerous because the penalty for being "not okay" has already been paid by Jesus. To prepare for more in heaven, we must become comfortable accepting that we have not gone very far into the faith of heaven. Understanding that we have not yet prepared for heaven very adequately opens the door for letting God through the Holy Spirit grow our spirits and further prepare us.

It is appealing to think that when we enter heaven all spiritual qualities just snap into place. The bulk of Scripture speaks against automatic perfection just by dying. There is just too much instruction in the Bible to live righteously, grow in obedience, and pursue sanctification.

So, let's you and I desire to get ready for heaven and not fool ourselves that everything will be taken care of when we die. That is not going to happen. It is disastrous to think we do not need to prepare for heaven.

Being in the presence of God and relating to Him will be the most wonderful thing about heaven. Consider this analogy of our eternal relationship with God in heaven. Imagine that two different people win a dinner with the famous person each of them most admires. The dinners will happen a year from now.

Person One is excited and tells others of her good fortune and from time to time studies a bit of information about the famous person she will meet. Since it is a year away, there are many days when Person One only remembers in the back of her mind that she will be having the dinner of her lifetime. Then the time comes, and she is completely thrilled and satisfied with her dinner experience.

Now, imagine that Person Two reacts differently to her good fortune to be with the famous person she would most like to have dinner with. She wants the time to be as wonderful as possible. She starts by learning deeply about that famous person. After that she tries to become more like that person so that there might be more connection during those two hours at the restaurant. She learns what kind of salad dressing the person always orders so that she can order the same. Plus, she learns that the famous person she will eat with has a charity for children with cancer. Therefore, she volunteers at a children's cancer ward at the hospital. When she has dinner and the person learns this, the famous person will appreciate her more and she will truly develop a closer relationship. The time comes for the dinner, and she is completely thrilled and satisfied.

Both women are completely satisfied with their very different levels of connection and closeness with their special person. This illustrates how in heaven we will all be completely satisfied with our relationship with God no matter how deep the relationship has developed.

But, anything that can enhance our eternal relationship with God should be actively pursued. It counts how we prepare now for our relationship with God for all eternity. Not for satisfaction, which will be 100%, but in depth and quality of that satisfaction.

Consider also that when we get to heaven, we will all receive a power surge in sensing God's presence. After all, we will finally be in His home. Each of us will be clearly aware that God is near us. The sin that clouds our perception of His nearness now will be gone. Being aware of God's presence today is like trying to hear something drop out of our pocket onto grass when a motorcycle roars by. It will be such a relief in heaven to not have the distractions of a sinful culture and be unhindered in knowing God is near.

We have no way of knowing for sure the specifics of our intimacy with God in heaven. In the period of a thousand years, will we each get to walk with Jesus for 5 minutes or will our "face time with God" be allocated differently? We all want to see Jesus, but He will have an awful lot of people to get around to.

However, God has this nature about Himself – He is everywhere. He is invisible, but everywhere. Right now He is as present with us as He will be in heaven. However, each of us perceives His presence at the level to which our spirits have developed.

Fortunately, being with Jesus in heaven is a whole lot more than seeing Him. There will be constant awareness of His presence. Feeling Him. Experiencing Him by our side without seeing Him. Once in a while we have that grace now. In heaven it will be unending grace to know that He is with us, not just through belief but through uninhibited spiritual perception and connection. In heaven it will be wonderful to see God, but even more wonderful to vibrantly sense Him.

A blind person, undistracted by vision, is more aware of our presence than a sighted person because he or she is more aware of our body warmth and the sound of our breathing. In heaven, we will be more aware of God's presence, just like that blind person. It will be fantastic to perceive God's presence in heaven so

vividly.

However, we each will enter heaven with different levels of connection with God based on how we grew spiritually to draw near to Him and relate to Him before death. While in heaven our relationship with God will grow in any way that does not require struggle against sin, only right now before death do we have the opportunity to develop special kinds of deep closeness with God. Someone who overcame the distracting sinful environment often to allow awareness of God's nearness before death will enter heaven with spiritual senses more keenly aware of God's presence than someone who thought of God only a couple of times a day.

Here is another thing to consider. There will be good things without number available to us in heaven for which we need to prepare.

If we were going on a vacation to someplace new and exciting, we would not know all of the opportunities awaiting us. We would want to prepare ourselves for any opportunity that might come up. If we would do that for a two-week vacation, what will we do for a life in heaven that lasts forever?

Heaven is alive and interesting with endless opportunities we now know nothing about. Does the New Jerusalem, the city in heaven that is 1500 miles square sound uninteresting? When we add its mysterious height of 1500 miles, we have to open our minds to unknowable possibilities. Surely, there will be things to learn, things to explore, and things to enjoy.

Much more exciting are all the relationships in heaven. Without sin ruining things, we will relate to God and other people with untainted joy. We should want to be ready for those relationships. While it will be eye-opening to see angels, it will be much more thrilling to communicate with them. We don't have a clue how to prepare to have relationships with angels, but we do know from the Bible how to prepare for the relationships with God and the other humans in heaven.

We will each enter heaven able to love the other citizens at different capacities dependent upon how far into obedience we were to specific Scriptures before we died, including those categorized by the Togethers,.

For example, we will enter heaven with spirits developed in encouraging others to the degree we already encouraged others to do the will of God. Those of us who excelled at this will be more able to place courage into others in heaven for some of the more difficult and fascinating opportunities offered there. Imagine the adventures awaiting us, like traveling to new places and doing new physical challenges. When others we encouraged are successful at something in heaven, we will share in their joy. Those of us who just dabbled in encouraging others will have weaker strength of spirit to place courage into others, sometimes not adequate to help a citizen of heaven with the more difficult opportunities they desire. Thus, joy will be less.

This next thing is very exciting! Think of all the conversations we will have in heaven with redeemed people from all over the world and from all centuries. It seems only reasonable that they will exhibit aspects of the cultures in which they lived, such as the way they see things, speech patterns, and cultural distinctions. How fascinating that can be – if we prepare our spirits for such fellowship.

Because sin will not be blocking or distorting our conversations, we will be able to remember everything good that happened before death. We will be surprised how some things we thought bad were actually good when seen from God's perspective.

In heaven we will finally be able to see and hear angels. Presently, sin blocks our ability to see them. However, now before death our brains might be perceiving and collecting their invisible presence in our unconscious memories. When in heaven, without sin still blocking our perception, we might remember events and finally see the angels in those memories as they took care of us in their service for God.

Also, without sinfulness and excessive self-focus in heaven, we will have a deeper empathy that will allow us to understand people's thoughts, feelings, motives and other things that were clouded during sin-contaminated life. This, too, will add fascination to the many wonderful conversations we will have in heaven.

It will take eternity to hear the many wonderful redemption stories of trillions of heaven's citizens from all times and all places. Just imagine our conversations during a portion of eternity with people of different cultures, centuries and geography. Every story told will praise God's part, some of it unseen before but clearly recalled after death. Millions of small groups all over heaven telling testimonies of praise, all at the same time but in different places. This explosion of conversations and stories will bring continual and endless praise to God from the moment beyond death to forever without end.

Imagine how interesting and thrilling this will be. The stories! The grace and mercies of God that took place in endless situations! So many cultures! Such variety! How exciting it's going to be!

However, being in these groups and understanding all of these wonderfully different people will require the spiritual ability to accept people, a quality of spirit the Bible teaches and one of the Togethers. What if one of us did not develop the ability to find the non-sinful aspects of other people's cultures and personal mannerisms interesting, fascinating, and enjoyable? What if one of us was only interested in people like himself or herself? It seems likely that such a person will sit in the story-telling circles in heaven for all eternity and be limited in comprehension and enjoyment.

A person who turned his or her back on the Lord's command to accept one another will be spiritually underdeveloped to appreciate God's creativity in people and miss out on a lot. He or she will sit in those heavenly circles of fellowship and be completely happy, but not able to connect with others to the degree that others will be able to – those whose spirits became more accepting and more like Jesus who died for all kinds of different people.

I hope I have convinced you to speed up your preparation for heaven. The quality of your life in heaven depends on what you do now. You are heaven bound! The excitement of going to paradise should be enough to put effort and obedience into the Togethers of Scripture to prepare your spirit for heaven.

You are now ready to go on and make changes in your spirit by learning about and implementing the 65 Togethers of Scripture, one by one. We will begin with Worship God Together.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to be willing to be continually transformed into the image of Jesus. Give us a sense of urgency about preparing for heaven. Keep us from putting off intentional desire to have the Holy Spirit change some new part of ourselves to be more like Jesus. And, when situations arise that require thoughts, emotions and actions like Jesus would deal with those predicaments, empower us to seek obedience to You as communicated in our Bibles.

Since obedience to how You have instructed us to relate to other Christians challenges us to become more like Jesus, help us to pay more attention to those relationships as paths to increased godliness. Urge us to see our Christian friendships and family relationships as much more important. Bring to our minds how we need to change to be more like Jesus in how we think, feel and act with people, especially those who are in the family of God. Help us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in loving others with the pure love of Jesus.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.