

Chapter 1

THE SECRET

Josh had it made. Josh was a good student and an outstanding athlete. He was All-State in football and basketball as well as one of the fastest sprinters in the state. He was being recruited by some of the best colleges in the country. Josh was one of those guys who as soon as he slid out of his mother's womb could probably bench 300 pounds and run the 40 in about four and half seconds, he had that much natural ability. Not only did he have talent, he had movie star looks and came from a wealthy family. He had the coolest car in town and girls followed him around like rock star groupies. A party wasn't a party unless Josh was there and Josh did like to party. Turn to the definition of "winner" in the dictionary and you would expect a picture of Josh to be there, so it seems.

Josh loved all the attention he got and he didn't want to disappoint his friends. He could drink with the best of them and he often did. Josh wasn't worried about anything, including how drinking would effect his game, because of his natural athletic ability he could party and still perform. Josh was drinking more and more, because after all, he was the coolest guy around and he could handle anything. Then one day after drinking too much at a party, Josh lost control of his car and crashed into a tree, and Josh was no more. Why did a guy who "had everything" feel like he had to drink to enjoy life? Is Josh alone?

I think you would agree that everyone wants to be viewed as a "winner", especially in our competitive culture. What we may disagree with is what makes someone a "winner". If you knew Josh would you consider him a "winner"? What does it take to become a "winner" in your eyes? Is it having or making a lot of money, being admired by others, or being able to satisfy physical desires? Is this what really make us happy, is this what gives us a deep down inside satisfaction with life? Or is there even something better to live for?

There is and that is why our goals in life should lead us toward finding contentment. What does being content mean? I once saw a movie where a man about to have an affair told his lover he wanted more than a content life with his wife. This character is like so many others who do not have a clue what being content is all about.

Being content is not boring! Being content is when you don't want to change anything in your life, no matter what the circumstances. It is a deep down inside satisfaction you have no matter what is happening on the surface. Being content is more long lasting than being happy and you will find many individuals who are happy but not content. Often what we think makes us feel good about life is caused by external events or circumstances, and we feel good only if the events or circumstances go according to how we want them to go. Being content is an internal sense of well-being that does not depend on external events or circumstances.

There is a secret to finding this contentment. Those who do not know the secret are constantly searching for something that will give them satisfaction with life but look in the wrong places, like Josh. Their search often leads to unhealthy and sometimes deadly lifestyles (i.e. drugs, drinking, thrills, etc.). Well-known musicians during my younger days such as Elvis Presley, Janis Joplin, and Jimmy Hendrix had what you would think everyone would want – fame, wealth, and adoration yet they are all dead from substance overdoses. Why were they living an escapist life, a life where getting "high" was their driving force? Too often this lifestyle results in the ultimate escape – suicide. Why do we sometimes hear of celebrities that many worship and adore taking their own lives, such as Marilyn Monroe or Kurt Cobain? What were they escaping from, after all

they had everything anyone wanted, or did they? Obviously, they did not have contentment and either did Josh. Wealth and adoration were not enough to give them a sense of peace, there was something tragically missing in their lives.

Our Pastor during one of his sermons described an interview he saw on television given by Diane Sawyer with Mariah Carey. In this interview a film clip showed Mariah's massive house and her many possessions. She had a wall full of her awards and recognition for her accomplishments. At the end of this interview she was asked the question if she was happy. She looked at her interviewer and replied, "I have everything that money can buy but I have never been more empty in my life than I am right now." Since I did not personally see this interview I cannot substantiate this statement, but her emotional breakdown was well publicized so it is apparent that even though she has everything money could buy, there was a void in her life!

We are too often deceived into what we think will make us content. TV, movies, music, and advertisements try to appeal to us by promoting self-indulgence instead of self-control. We typically think pleasure is the answer and we seek out short-term pleasures that we have to pay a long-term price for. For example, many lead a lifestyle of drinking and drugs at the expense of poor health and difficulty in doing well in school, jobs, and relationships. Substance abuse is the main factor that causes individuals to turn to a life of crime. Even if Josh had not had his accident he was heading down a road of self-destruction because his body would eventually pay a price for the abuse he was putting it through. His performance would be affected in time, there is no way it couldn't be.

Others live a life of sexual promiscuity at the expense of babies being born to those unprepared to raise them, high risk of disease, and difficulty in remaining faithful to a relationship. Unwanted babies are major problems in our society today that carry huge social and psychological costs. Sexually transmitted diseases can cause serious long-term health problems. Broken relationships due to infidelity carry heavy emotional costs.

There is tremendous peer pressure to engage in activities that carry a high risk of creating addiction problems, problems that destroys lives. Chapter 6 (True Freedom) is an important chapter in this book that discusses our desires for physical pleasure and the bondage that can be created from these desires. The quest for these self-gratifying pleasures is often what stands in the way of doing well in school or work because they may keep us from studying, going to class, or going to work. Focusing on these indulgences may seem to be harmless initially, and of course feeling good is always fun at first, but the end result is a major decrease in your overall quality of life. Yet, many think the quest for physical pleasures is what life is all about.

We also tend to put too much emphasis on material possessions, thinking this is what will bring true happiness. Advertisers do their best to try to make us unsatisfied with what we already own and at the same time make us think the key to being happy is owning what they are trying to sell. In my own life I can think of many times I was all excited about things I wanted to buy, such as a new stereo system or new car, and how I thought life would be so much better when I had the money to buy what I wanted. I also remember the let down I felt when I finally bought what I wanted and how quickly the excitement wore off. So what did I do? I just started dreaming of owning something else thinking – well this will make me happy. How many of us still do this because we think the answer to being content is in what we own?

A great example of someone who "had it all" was Israel's King Solomon, the son of King David. He was probably one of the wealthiest men in the world, he was the King so he had great power, and he had a harem (all the sex he could ever handle!). Josh was a nothing compared to Solomon. King Solomon was known for his great wisdom, writing the book of wisdom (Proverbs)

in the bible. He also wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, which is an interesting book that tells of his search for what gives life meaning.

In chapter 2 of this book, versus 10-11 he tells us he denied himself nothing his eyes did desire. If there was something that gave him pleasure he desired he just had to say the word and he got what he wanted. His achievements as king were part of life he took pride in, a part of life he thought would give him pleasure. Yet, when he reflected on how much happiness all this brought him he said it was meaningless, like chasing after the wind.

In chapter 5, versus 10-12 of the same book he talks about love of money. He states whoever loves wealth never has enough of it and he starts to lose sleep because he is always worried about keeping what he has. He tells us the sleep of those who have little is sweet because they don't worry about losing what they don't have. Again Solomon reflects saying all these goods serve no real purpose other than to feast your eyes on them so the pursuit of wealth is just like the pursuit of pleasure, it is as fruitful as chasing after the wind. He came to the same conclusion about living for your work (2:17-23), living for status (4:13-16), and even living for wisdom (1:12-18). He had it all, everything anyone could want and in 2:17 he tells us he hated life! Everything was grievous to him, meaningless, like chasing after the wind!

Solomon did discover what gave meaning to life (2:24-26, 12:13,14). So have countless others, professional athletes, coaches, businessmen, individuals who by anybody's definition you would consider successful. They know the secret of what really makes them content and they know it will not be found in wealth, pleasure, and adoration. The Apostle Paul knew this secret as well.

Philippians 4:12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Paul was a major contributor of the New Testament. He was a Jewish leader that had been responsible for persecuting Christians. Something happened in his life to transform him from defending a religion based on following the laws of God to risking his life for a man, Jesus Christ, who died for those who knew they could not live up to the standards God required. Paul suffered many hardships for simply telling others about Jesus. He was whipped, beaten, persecuted, and imprisoned because of his faith. When he wrote the verse above he was in prison waiting trial for sharing his beliefs. Yet, because of this secret he never complained and valued every moment of his life. The secret that provides a deep, down inside satisfaction is seeking a meaningful spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ.

John 6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

What do you think Jesus was talking about when inferring there are those who are hungry or thirsty? I think of someone who is not content. I think of someone who feels there is something missing in their life and they are constantly in search of what it will take to fill that void. Conversely, I think of someone who is not hungry or thirsty as someone who is satisfied with life, someone not searching for anything in life because they have found what they were looking for. I think of someone who enjoys life no matter what the circumstances. This book will show you why and how a spiritual relationship with God and His son Jesus will make a difference in your life by giving you a sense of peace, contentment, and fulfillment you probably have not experienced before. Your spiritual relationship will also improve your performance in all that you do as well as help you take advantage of God's amazing power, as he becomes more involved in your life.

The next verse tells us what Jesus promises a relationship with Him will accomplish while warning us about someone out to rob us of this relationship.

John 10:10 - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. Another translations ends with - ***I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly***".

The thief described is Satan, who will be discussed in more detail later in this book. Satan and his forces want to prevent you from having the peace, joy, and contentment God wants you to have by getting you to seek pleasures and make choices that at best keep you from having true fulfillment, at worse that will destroy you.

These spiritual forces working against us are very real and something we typically do not give enough thought about. If we did we would have a greater understanding of what is behind world views contrary to Christian views and this important issue is covered in Chapters 3 (Can We Trust Our Playbook) and 12 (Be Prepared for War). Satan will try to keep us from understanding it is only a relationship with Jesus that will really satisfy and give us a high quality life.

John 10:10 not only gives us insight into what kind of life Jesus wants us to have but it also offers some compelling evidence for God's existence. A spiritual force out to destroy us offers the only valid reason why we do so many destructive things that we do. I have heard many individuals say they see God in nature. I see God in human nature. If we were creatures of evolution you would think our natural tendencies would be to do what ever we can to extend and improve the qualities of our lives. Yet we do the opposite! Our natural tendencies tend to be self-destructive and we have to work extra hard at doing what is really beneficial for our lives. For example – it is easier for us to loaf and play than to study or go to work. We seem to crave foods that are harmful while neglecting foods that are healthy. We make many lifestyle choices such as smoking, drinking, drugs, and over-eating which reduces the years of our lives as well as choices that reduce the quality of our lives. We have to work much harder to develop constructive habits than destructive habits. We are the only species with a free will and we are the only species that actually chooses to destroy ourselves! This makes perfect sense if there are spiritual forces out to destroy us and no sense if we are products of evolution.

Because of these forces, our own choices, our weaknesses and the weaknesses of others, life can be full of stress, troubles, and disappointments – bad relationships, family problems, troubles at work, financial problems, as well as pressure in school, sports, and other activities. Jesus invites us to come to him in order to help cope with life's problems. For many individuals it is a crisis in their lives that triggers seeking a deeper spiritual relationship and they find it is that relationship that gets them through their crisis.

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Who is Jesus? He is God in the flesh, the Son of God who lived 2,000 years ago. He lived in order to become a human sacrifice so we can be reconciled to God. Chapter 4 (The Only Way) will discuss why we need Jesus to be reconciled to God, but I am hoping you are beginning to see a relationship with Him offers so much in this life. Jesus was also sent to "set us free" by revealing God's truths through the power of the Spirit. The Spirit (Holy Spirit) helps us to know God and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11 (The Game Plan).

There is much in life we are in bondage to – guilt, destructive habits, and destructive attitudes. Through spiritual growth we will understand great truths that will free us from this bondage and this freedom will make a tremendous difference on how we live and enjoy our lives.

John 8:31,32 - To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

God wants us to be content, fulfilled, and free because he loves us. Just like our love for others motivates us to do what we can to make their lives better God's love is what is behind Him wanting to be involved in our lives in order to make our lives better. Understanding the depth of God's love for us is a very important step in order for us to desire to have a relationship with Him. Understanding God's love is the key to having a life transforming spiritual relationship. It is the key to what it will take to really impact your life instead of just having a "religion" that may not do much for you.

Not only does God love us, he gave us Jesus who loves us equally. I believe too few of us really grasp what the love of God and his son Jesus is all about, but when we do, look out, because that is when we start experiencing God's great power and His presence in our lives. Experiencing his power and presence is what it means to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. The apostle Paul is making this very point in the following scriptures;

Eph 3:17-19 And I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

John 3:16 tell us God loved us so much that he sacrificed his one and only son Jesus so we can have eternal life with Him. I believe most of us don't realize how significant this often quoted scripture really is. There is no other greater act of love then to give one's life for another. Understanding God's great love is the key to answering questions we ask ourselves about why we exist, what our purpose in life should be, and why there is so much evil in the world!

Because of God's love we were created in order to have a relationship with Him. In Acts 17:26,27 the reason for our creation is explained. We are told in verse 26; from one man God made every nation of men, and it was determined the times and exact places where these men should live. Verse 27 explains God did this so mankind would seek him and perhaps reach out and find him, and that he is not far from each one of us. Jesus tells us in John 14:23 that if anyone loves him and obeys his teachings, God will love him, and he and God will make their home with him.

If you have ever wondered why we exist, why we were created these verses answer that question very clearly. We exist so we can seek and find God. We exist to have a relationship with God and his son Jesus. Think about why we have to seek him instead of God making it obvious he exists. These verses indicate we were created with a free will, the choice has to be ours to seek him, and this free will is a very important part of God's plan of creation. In other words, for our relationship with God to mean anything to him, it has to come about because of our love for him. We have to want this relationship.

Genesis 1:27 tells us God created man and woman in his image. 1 John 4:17 states we are like Him. God is a spirit so He is not talking about our physical appearance since our body is designed to deal with the three-dimensional world we live in. These scriptures refer to our emotions and the attributes that form our character. Since God directs his own will, being created in his likeness means we, unlike animals, have free will. Understanding we are created in His image is

critical in order to know God. This means we can look to ourselves to better understand God and why love is so important to him.

Think about yourself – what would life be like for you if you had no one to share your love with? Are relationships important to you? We have been created with a desire to form relationships, and if we have no quality relationships in our life we can be overcome with a tremendous sense of loneliness. This desire is part of our God like nature. What makes our relationships meaningful is when we are loved and cared about. Think about how you feel when you do love someone and that love is returned to you? Would it be important to you if the love you received was voluntary or forced? If it is forced is it really love? These questions are the key to comprehending why we were created with a free will – the freedom to choose and why our relationship with God is so important to him.

Our free will and ability to make choices is what distinguishes us from animals that survive on instincts alone. Our ability to love offers additional proof of God's existence. Love is not necessary for the survival of man! Animals still manage to procreate due to sexual instincts and our intelligence is what is needed to make up for physical shortcomings.

Science fiction has touched on the need (or lack of) for our emotions. Fans of the science fiction TV series Star Trek should be familiar with the race called Vulcans. Vulcans came from the planet of the same name and what distinguished them from humans was their inability to experience emotions. The character Spock, who was a Vulcan, often argued that the emotions of those from earth prevented them from relying on logic, and logic was superior to emotions for the survival and advancement of mankind. Although this is a fictional situation a very interesting point was made. What possible purpose could there be for love unless there is something to all this stuff about a relationship with God?

God took a risk when He created us with a free will because this allowed for the possibility of evil in the world. We can choose to steal, kill, and harm but we can also choose to love. We can choose to follow God or we can choose to reject Him. It is a risk God had to take in order for our relationship to mean anything to him. If we all chose to follow God there would be no evil in this world.

We only need to look to ourselves to understand how love and free will are intertwined. My wife and myself effectively created our son and daughter. We love them more than anything in the world. We do what we do for them, including setting rules and restrictions, because we love them. Now we could say “if you want to be fed and have a roof over your head you must love us”. They probably would say “we love you mom and dad” but this kind of love would be no more meaningful than programming a robot to say it loves us. What means everything to us is when they express their love and gratefulness out of their own free will because they know we love them and they truly desire to have a relationship with us.

Maybe you cannot relate as a parent, but have you ever coached or been in a leadership position? Have you ever had a friend who really looked up to you? How would you feel if your friend or someone you coached or led showed their admiration for you by constantly coming to you for advice and they freely let you know how much they appreciated your help? It would make you feel pretty good wouldn't it? What means a lot to us is when our son and daughter or anyone else we care about come to us for advice, when they share what's going on in their lives, and when they desire our friendship. God wants to be our friend, wants us to share with Him what is going on in our lives, and wants us to come to Him for help and guidance.

Heaven was created so we can continue our relationship, but without the self-centered and fleshly desires that stand in the way of our relationship with God.

John 17:3 - Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Why doesn't everyone go to heaven? Would you want someone to live in your house who doesn't want to have anything to do with you, especially if you have given them opportunities to know about the love you have for them. If heaven were full of people who rejected God then it wouldn't be heaven for those who chose to follow Him!

John 17:3 states God and Jesus want to know us. There are eight different Greek words for the word "know", and the Greek word *ginosko* used in this verse indicates a relationship where what is known is of value and importance to the one who knows. Then it should mean something to us when we understand God really wants to know us. And should it be a surprise that God really wants us to know Him for the same reasons? Think about what this really means! We are valuable and important to God, in spite of our many weakness and sins, and he wants to be valuable and important to us, this is what a great and loving relationship is all about!

The reason many that go to church on a regular basis do not have the contentment and peace they should have is because they really do not know God and Jesus. The reason many who profess to be Christians lead lives that are no different than anyone else is because they don't really know God. The reason many go to church only out of sense of obligation is because they do not know God. The reason why we don't trust God and why doing his will is not high on our priority list is because we do not know him. The reason why we worry more about pleasing our peers more than God is because we really don't know him. If we really know God, He will change our lives, and that is why some refuse to try and know him, they do not want to change. If we do want to know God then the way to accomplish this will be through our spiritual growth.

Because God loves us and desires this relationship He will make it worth our while. Not only does He desire to make our relationship worthwhile He knows how. Unlike we who are imperfect, He is perfect. He is all-knowing which means He knows what is best for us while we know little. He is all-powerful and the creator of the universe is capable of doing great things in our lives. He will make our relationship satisfying, He will show us how to get the most out of life, and He will help us get through life's tough times. He will be involved in our lives. You can even "have it all" and still be content!

Solomon, a man who had it all and hated life, discovered this great truth! In Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 he tells us he realized that it is good and proper for a man to enjoy life and to find satisfaction in his efforts, that is what we are meant to do in the short time we have on this earth. He states in chapter 2, verse 25 of this same book that without God, who can find enjoyment? In chapter 5, versus 19 and 20 he goes on to tell us when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables any man to enjoy them along with his work – this is a gift of God. Solomon acknowledges it is a relationship with God that gives us fulfillment and contentment with life. Solomon discovered what Jesus tells us in John 10:10 – that God wants us to have life to the full, an abundant life.

The key to having this abundant life is putting your hope in God, and his son Jesus, not in what you do or what you own. We are told in 1 Timothy 6:17 if we have wealth, not to be arrogant and put our hope in our wealth, which is so uncertain. We are told to put our hope in God, who richly provides what we need for our enjoyment. Romans 15:13 tell us God is a God of hope if we trust him. What does it mean to put our hope in something? What we hope in is what we rely on for what we want. If we want to truly get satisfaction out of life, if that is our hope, then we have to turn to God for that satisfaction.

If you really deep down inside believe in God, if through knowing him you love him, you will get much more out of life than contentment, a satisfaction with life. You will be filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy as stated in the following scripture.

1 Peter 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,

Joy is used throughout the bible and will be used liberally in this book. Webster's Dictionary defines joy as a feeling of great pleasure or happiness that comes from success, good fortune, or a sense of well-being. Joy may not be a very macho word in today's times so it is not used often. In fact I have a hard time imagining a football player in a team meeting telling his teammates he wants more joy in his life or for that matter I don't know if anyone would use that word for fear of being teased. It's too bad because according to the definition of joy it describes a very desirable state of being. I had thought about using a different word for joy but I decided not to succumb to Satan's typical ploy of perverting something good into something bad. Joy is good and joy is promised to us when we put our hope in God. Joy is one of the major rewards of our spiritual relationship with God.

As I have already indicated, another reward of a strong spiritual relationship is an "abundant life" as Jesus promises in John 10:10 (KJV). What is an abundant life or life to the full as stated in the NIV translation of the same verse. Two authors I will reference in the next several paragraphs decided to look into research that would either support or debunk the view that there is a correlation between faith and a high quality life, or life to the full. The first author, Patrick Glynn, in his book "God – The Evidence", examines what contributes to a life of mental well-being and happiness.

Before I quote from this first author I would like to provide a little background about Patrick Glynn. Glynn earned his PHD from Harvard University and is the associate director and scholar in residence at the George Washington University Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies. He has written numerous books on religion, culture, politics, and foreign affairs. He has frequently appeared as a commentator on various network television news programs such as NBC Nightly News and ABC World News Tonight. He is among a growing group of intellectuals that were philosophical atheists or agnostics and from an objective search for truth came to the conclusion there is a God. His book is about the "evidence" this highly educated author examined.

The second chapter of this book challenges the view held by the once popular Sigmund Freud, a view accepted and preached by psychoanalysts through out the world, and a view that contributed (along with Darwin's theories on evolution) to our societies transformation from a faith based society to a highly secular society. Freud viewed religion as a mental illness and he spent much of his life aggressively attacking religious belief. He predicted religious belief was a neurosis that humanity would outgrow.

Yet the evidence over the last several decades has shown how wrong Freud was about the impact of religion as well as many of his other commonly accepted views. In fact evidence has indicated religious belief is the primary factor associated with mental health and happiness. Study after study has correlated strong religious belief with lifestyle choices and behaviors that make significant contributions to a high quality life.

For example, alcohol and drug abuse is highest among those with little or no religious commitment and often the abuse leads to a life of crime while those with the strongest religious commitment abuse the least. If someone wants to overcome the destructive effects of addictions the overwhelming evidence is that religion is the key to rehabilitation. In fact the evidence is so

strong that most secular rehabilitation organizations recognize the importance of religion in their treatment programs. I have experienced this truth first hand as my daughter was sent to a state run rehabilitation program and God was a huge part of the treatment and recovery process.

There are studies that correlate high levels of religious commitment with low levels of depression and stress. Hopelessness and despair are major factors contributing to depression and Christians are never without hope. Frequent church attendees are four times less likely to commit suicide than those who do not attend church. The correlation of church attendance is in fact a greater factor than unemployment in suicide rates.

There are a number of studies that point out strong church attendance correlates with strong families and family stability. For those who do not attend church divorce rates are much higher as well as other forms of family discord, including problems between parents and their children. In fact there is a clear relationship between family solidarity, strength, and health with church activity and involvement.

A study has shown church attendance was the most important variable in predicting sexual satisfaction and another study has shown religious women have a higher level of sexual satisfaction than non-religious women. According to another study a high correlation was found between religion and those who say they would choose their same spouse again if they had that choice, a good indicator of a strong marriage. This makes sense because love and a de-emphasis on self and an emphasis on caring for others are what Christianity should be about. Selfishness is a major destructive force to relationships and will prevent sexual satisfaction in at least one of the partners of a marriage.

Studies and surveys point out there is a correlation between the level of spiritual commitment and the overall happiness and well-being of individuals. A Gallup survey showed that individuals who claimed their faith was the most important influence in their life were twice as likely to describe themselves as very happy as opposed to those with minimal spiritual commitment. Even a professed agnostic, Guenter Lewy who stated he is not a Christian or theist, discovered the beneficial byproducts of Christianity and goes even further in his book “Why America Needs Religion” by claiming a strong religious commitment is the answer to overcoming the social ills of our country.

Lewy is a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He stated in the preface of his book that he started his writing with the intention of refuting the view that society was facing a moral crisis due to the rejection of God, a moral crisis that was responsible for increases in violence, drug and alcohol addictions, broken homes, and out of wedlock births. He states in his preface:

“A funny thing, if one can call it that, happened on the way to the completion of this book, which I envisioned as a defense of secular humanism and ethical relativism. Positions that I had always supported and taken for granted turned out to be, on a new reflection, less convincing than I assumed.”

The title of his book makes it clear how much his views changed from his objective research. I would like to believe most individuals understand in order to have an “abundant” life some personal sacrifices have to be made and self-constraint is needed to make beneficial lifestyle choices. Lewy understood this and concludes the spread of secularism has weakened traditional values, values such as self-control, responsibility and accountability that are fostered by a strong religious commitment, and these weakened values have been the root cause of social problems that lead to unfulfilling and unproductive lives.

He examined the correlation between religious individuals and how their “religiousness” affected juvenile delinquency, adult crime, prejudice and intolerance, divorce, and out of wedlock births by teens. Some of his findings should be of no surprise to those reading this book and would even be obvious to non-believers. . For example, there is a strong correlation between being involved in religious activities and not being involved in crime. A study has shown among urban African-Americans regular church attendance is the primary factor in avoiding turning to drugs or crime and regular attendance at prison bible studies is a huge factor in keeping former prisoners from going back to prison. Even on a smaller scale of criminal activity, activity that falls more under unethical than criminal, frequent church attendees are less likely to steal office supplies for personal use than those who do not attend church.

It is important to note, as Lewy discovered, there have been many studies by social scientists that concluded Christians were no more moral than non-believers and in fact were more prejudiced and less compassionate. After reviewing these studies Guenter Lewy found there were two factors that made these studies deceptive and wrong. These factors were an obvious bias by many social scientists against Christianity and the difference between individuals that actually lived their faith as opposed to those who merely confessed or used their faith. This last factor is important to understand as a primary purpose of this book is to help the reader to understand how a strong spiritual commitment will make a difference, while simply using a “professed belief” as a ticket into heaven in case there is one does little to benefit anyone.

An example of a biased study that distorts the role of faith in society was a report in 1969 that concluded religious individuals were less compassionate than non-religious Americans. The criteria used to measure “social compassion” was how individuals stood on certain government social programs and if they were or were not sympathetic toward certain student protest movements. In other words if Christians did not agree with certain protest movements and did not believe government was the solution to social problems then they were labeled as uncompassionate.

If one were to use volunteer work and financial giving as an indicator of compassion and if one believed part of what makes up an “abundant” life is having compassion that creates a desire to help others, then faith does make a difference. While only 6% of the least religious individuals, according to a recent study, were involved in volunteer work for the community, 38% of the most religious committed their time to helping others. In addition, regular church or synagogue attendees are two and a half times more generous in giving to charities than those who never attend religious services, and there is also a strong correlation between religiousness and the willingness to care for a child with disabilities, a good indicator of true compassion.

A person that is prejudiced and intolerant of others will more than likely be less compassionate than those who are not prejudiced and intolerant. This is an area where the level of spiritual maturity makes a significant difference. Studies and opinion polls, in general, have shown religious people are more prejudiced and intolerant than non-religious individuals. I believe an explanation for these findings may be that there are many who call themselves Christians and because of pride and/or a lack of understanding of scripture, have developed an attitude of self-righteousness. These types of individuals tend to be more judgmental than loving. This un-Christ like mindset will be discussed in subsequent chapters of this book.

Those with a high level of spiritual commitment and maturity value attributes such as humility and love of others, as studies have supported, and these values are more internalized than those with a low level of spiritual commitment. These spiritually committed individuals will be less prejudiced and intolerant than those with a low spiritual commitment and even those who are

not religious at all. In fact, these spiritually mature individuals are often the types of individuals that have the greatest impact on their community, an impact that benefits people of all races, religions, and social position.

Both Lewy and Glynn in their respective books cited studies showing the strong tie between faith and family solidarity. Lewy went into a much deeper analysis of the family and concluded it was the breakdown of the family due to a weakening of the Judeo/Christian commitment to marriage that is a primary factor leading to huge increases in crime, substance abuse, and out of wedlock births. He concludes from his research that it is this family breakdown that has been far more responsible for problems in the inner-cities than the lack of economic opportunities.

A related factor that has caused tremendous social consequences, especially among African Americans is out of wedlock births, and the negative consequences are most evident for teenage mothers. Children born to unwed teenage mothers are more likely to be less healthy (this correlation has been found even among older more affluent unwed mothers), have lower IQ rates, and have far more behavioral problems than children born to a more traditional family. The main determinant of sexual values is the level of spiritual commitment as the more spiritually committed the teen is the less likely they will have an out of wedlock birth.

Divorce, the result and cause of family breakdowns, is endemic in our country as nearly 50% of all marriages end up dissolving. Once again the level of spiritual commitment makes a difference in holding a marriage together. For example, in the Unitarian Church, where religion is more of a social aspect and the authority of the bible is downplayed at best, the divorce rate is higher than those who claim to be non-believers. Claiming to be spiritual is not enough to hold a marriage together! Studies indicate the stronger the spiritual commitment of the couple the more likely the marriage will survive, in other words there is truth to the saying – those who pray together stay together.

It should now be obvious there is a clear correlation between spiritual commitment and mental health and happiness. There are also numerous studies linking strong religious beliefs with better physical health - lower stress related illnesses, quicker recoveries from heart attacks and other conditions, and a longer life span. In an on-line CNN news report the byline asks – Do Religious People Really Live Longer? The answer from the article was a resounding yes as 42 scientific studies linked faith with longer life spans and better health. In the May 2001 issue of Readers Digest there is an article called “The Healing Power of Faith” and this article states more and more physicians are seeing the relationship between faith, recovery, and prevention.

All the factors up to now point to how a strong spiritual commitment influences lifestyle choices and a healthy mental outlook that contributes to “life to the full”. Another benefit, a benefit strongly linked to the level of spiritual commitment according to scripture, is God’s supernatural intervention in our lives. There are studies that link prayer and healing. For example, a study by Dr. Dale Matthews documents evidence indicating a controlled group of patients with rheumatoid arthritis being prayed for had a measurably higher recovery rate than a group that was not prayed for.

I personally do not need to read about studies to know God answers prayers. God has answered my prayers countless times and in ways that left no doubt about God’s involvement. In fact it is these answered prayers that have taken me from someone who at a young age doubted the existence of God, to someone who then wanted to believe in God, who hoped there is a God, who at a later age was pretty sure there is a God (like many that claim to be Christians today), to someone who absolutely knows there is a God.

I will concede it is quite possible to have a good, productive life without God. But if you are honest with yourself you should see from the overwhelming evidence that a strong relationship with God stacks the odds in your favor of having a good life, an abundant life, a life to the full. This relationship will help you make beneficial lifestyle choices, you will also be better equipped to handle the trials and tribulations life often throws at you, you will have a life that will be a positive influence on other lives, and you will have a fulfilling life with a purpose. For the relationship to be beneficial you need to know God.

Unfortunately not really knowing God, not having a firm belief in his truths, describes far too many of us and explains why there are so many who say they believe in God and who do not have the abundant life we should have. This description has described much of my own life even though I called myself a Christian. What we need to understand is that it is a strong spiritual relationship with God that makes a difference in our lives, and that makes a positive difference in the lives of those we influence.

A spiritual relationship does not mean you have to give up having fun. In fact, having fun is part of what gives us life to the full, or an abundant life. The problem is the type of fun we desire, because some types of fun can be very destructive. This is why it is so important we become aware of the fact there is a spiritual force that will try to separate us from God by deceiving and tempting us with pleasures that will not give us a deep down inside satisfaction. These forces, which are discussed in more detail later in this book, will try to tempt us with fun that creates economic, physical, and spiritual bondage. Our own selfishness will be what allows us to give in to these temptations.

Think about this – if you were Satan how would you rob people of the joy God wants them to have – the joy described in 1 Peter 1:8? Making their lives miserable can work for some but it is tough times that often bring people closer to God. Give people just enough happiness in their life for temporary satisfaction – just enough where they stop short of seeking something more. This would be like making a 6’ 3”, 240 pound strong as an ox baseball player feel satisfied with hitting only singles when he could be experiencing the exhilaration of hitting home runs or a gifted student being happy making Cs instead of As. It would be like someone being satisfied with a job that pays the bills instead of a job they enjoy and that more than pays the bills. At the same time make people think they will have less fun because they will have to give up what they enjoy in order to have a relationship with God. This is how Satan works with many of us, but the truth is, if you give up anything it will be because you want to - not because you have to!

Too often it is our own misplaced priorities and attitudes that keep us from having the peace and joy a spiritual relationship should provide. We let guilt, pride, forming our identities in things that do not give real fulfillment, disobedience, and not trusting in God to interfere with living the life we should live. Since we rarely seem to experience the peace and contentment we should have we should give these destructive attitudes a great deal of thought because they are so harmful to us. Overcoming these ingrained mind-sets will be what will transform your life. Much of this book is devoted to helping you understand how these attitudes rob you of the deep down inside satisfaction with life a spiritual relationship with God will bring as well as how to overcome these mind-sets.

Relationships are important. Focusing on a relationship with God instead of focusing on being religious should be our goal. God created us with a desire to develop healthy relationships and this is why having quality relationships is so important to us. What is a healthy relationship? It’s a relationship where the other person in the relationship cares for you and is devoted to making your life better. I believe a major tactic Satan uses to separate us from God is to try and get us to

substitute unhealthy relationships and influences for healthy relationships found in family and church. It is possible the people in unhealthy relationship care for you but the reason the relationship is unhealthy is because they will influence you to go down a road that will make your life worse, not better.

I understand why resisting negative peer pressure can be so difficult for many, especially those who are not married, because of our desire to form relationships. We want others to like us or at least accept us. We often give in to peer pressure in order to feel accepted. My marriage makes it much easier for me to resist harmful lifestyle choices. I don't have to worry about peer pressure anymore because it is my wife that is most important to me, that is the relationship that influences my life the most other than God.

If you are single developing strong relationship with those who will be good influences will make it easier for you to resist harmful lifestyle choices. This is why getting involved with church bible studies, campus based ministries, and other organizations that put you in contact with other believers are so important. Getting involved with these groups will help develop your relationship with God, and you can't have any more of a quality relationship than a relationship with God. My hope is this book gives you additional insights and desire to help you develop that relationship.

Who doesn't want to have more peace and contentment in their life? Who doesn't want to be able to live life to the full? Who doesn't want to fulfill their dreams and reach their potential as a person? Who doesn't want to experience a joy you may not have thought possible – the inexpressible and glorious joy described in 1 Peter 1:8. Knowing what we want is easy; knowing how to get what we want is our challenge. This is why I hope you realize making your spiritual relationship with God and Jesus a priority in your life is the key to having a winning life, as so clearly pointed out in the following verse.

Matthew 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The primary objective of this chapter is to give you a motive or reason to continue reading. Many of the topics touched on in this chapter will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. I hope you have a desire to read on because you realize there can be more to life than what you are experiencing now. Unfortunately many individuals are drawn to a spiritual relationship for such reasons such as a fear of going to hell or a crises in their lives. Many procrastinate dealing with spiritual issues because they feel life is pretty good and death is a long way off. But why wait until there is a crises or worse! Life could change very quickly and just read a newspaper or watch the news to understand bad things can happen unexpectedly.

This chapter should make it obvious God wants you to enjoy life now! Not only will a spiritual relationship get you into heaven and get you through tough times it will make a good life even better. One of the most fulfilling aspects of a strong spiritual relationship will be because of having a new sense of purpose. You will develop a desire and the tools to be a positive influence on the lives of others. Making a difference in lives of others will give you a feeling of real value. Then you will know you are a "winner" according to anyone who really knows what's important in life.