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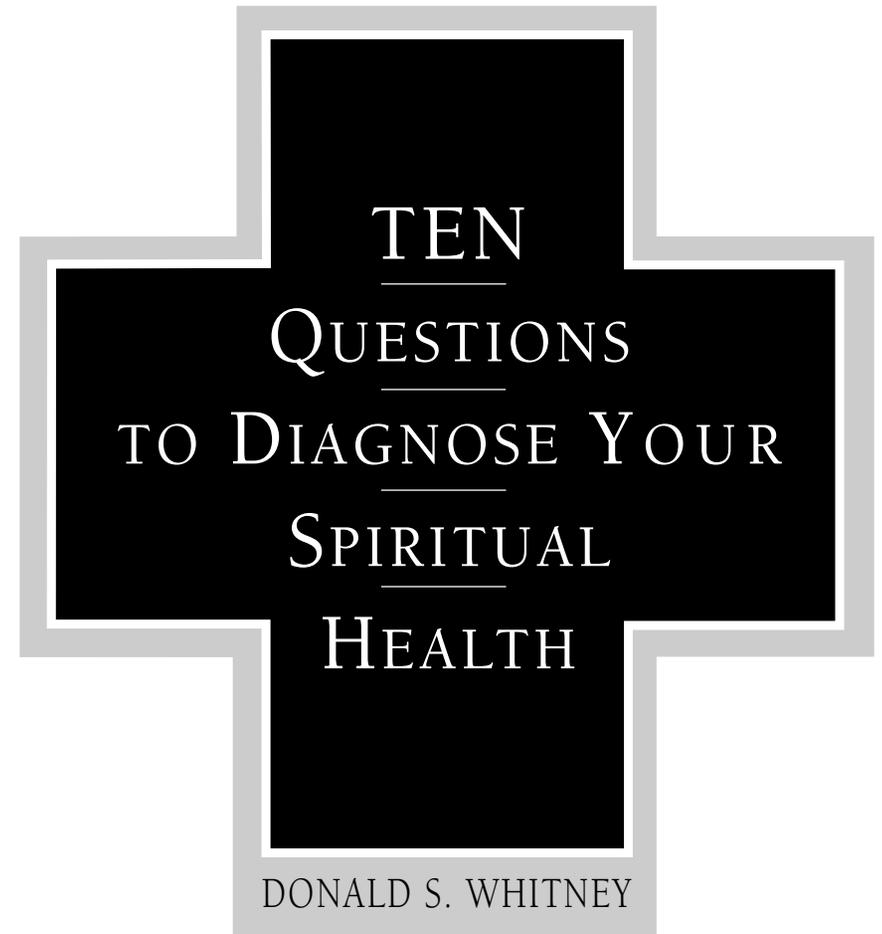
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TEN
QUESTIONS
TO DIAGNOSE YOUR
SPIRITUAL
HEALTH



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For “Him who is able to establish you . . . ; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever.
Amen.”

(Romans 16:25,27, NASB)

And for all three generations of my girls.
May the Lord always grant you
spiritual health and growth.

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(Romans 1:8).

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“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Hebrews 6:10).

INTRODUCTION

“DURING THE PAST YEAR, HAVE YOU HAD ANY TROUBLE SLEEPING?
“Have you experienced any breathing difficulties?
“Any changes in your eyesight?
“Relax while I test your reflexes.
“Has the nurse drawn your blood yet?
“Now for this next test . . .”

This is the way it goes during my annual physical checkup. The doctor always evaluates my bodily health by two means—questions and tests.

The English Puritans of 1550 to 1700 used to refer to ministers as “physicians of the soul.” In our day, as in theirs, the timeless process of discerning one’s *spiritual* health likewise involves questions and tests. My purpose in writing these pages is to act as a physician of the soul—to ask questions and suggest spiritual tests that can, by the help of the Holy Spirit, enable you to self-diagnose your spiritual health.

For health to be present, of course, there must be life. I wrote this book with the assumption that its readers would possess the eternal life given by grace to those who know God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. The night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Stressing the necessity of knowing Jesus, the Son of God, in order to have eternal life, the apostle John added, “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).

I realize, however, that many who begin reading here will do so with a false sense of assurance that they know Jesus and

that God has given them eternal life. Nothing in the world is more important than an eternal, life-giving knowledge of God through Jesus, who is the only way to the Father (see John 14:6). I urge you not to take for granted the existence of such a relationship between yourself and God. The Bible itself implores you to “make your call and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10).

Where eternal life through Christ does exist, there should be not only health but also growth. That is what this book is about—evaluating your spiritual health and growth. Throughout, remember that just as Jesus is the source of spiritual *life*, so also is He the standard of spiritual *health*. And regarding spiritual *growth*, we are to “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). As Jonathan Edwards said so emphatically,

Christians are Christlike: none deserve the name of Christians that are not so, in their prevailing character The branch is of the same nature with the stock and root, has the same sap, and bears the same sort of fruit. The members have the same kind of life with the head. It would be strange if Christians should not be of the same temper and spirit that Christ is of; when they are his flesh and his bone, yea are one spirit (1 Corinthians 6:17), and live so, that it is not they that live, but Christ that lives in them.¹

So whatever the present state of your spiritual health or the rate of your spiritual growth, let's begin by “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2), and “press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). May the Lord be pleased to use this little volume to help you “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Peter 3:18).

I AM CONVINCED THAT THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS
ATTAINING A HIGHER STANDARD OF HOLINESS IS TO
REALIZE MORE FULLY THE AMAZING SINFULNESS OF
SIN.

—J. C. RYLE

DO YOU STILL GRIEVE OVER SIN?

IN 1725, THE YEAR BEFORE HE SETTLED IN NORTHAMPTON, Massachusetts, to help his grandfather pastor the church there, a young Jonathan Edwards wrote:

I have had a vastly greater sense of my own wickedness, and the badness of my heart, than ever I had before my conversion. It has often appeared to me that if God should mark iniquity against me I should appear the very worst of all mankind—of all that have been, since the beginning of the world to this time, and that I should have by far the lowest place in hell.

My wickedness, as I am in myself, has long appeared to me perfectly ineffable, and swallowing up all thought and imagination; like an infinite deluge or

mountains over my head. I know not how to express better what my sins appear to me to be than by heaping infinite upon infinite, and multiplying infinite by infinite. Very often, for these many years, these expressions are in my mind, and in my mouth, “Infinite upon infinite . . . Infinite upon infinite!” When I look into my heart, and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell.¹

Is this normal, healthy Christianity? Or is this obsessive, unnecessary groveling? I believe that Edwards’ words of grief over his sin not only indicate that he was growing in grace, but also that all growing Christians think and feel as Edwards did. Here’s what I mean.

WHEN TO GRIEVE IS TO GROW

The closer you get to Christ, the more you will hate sin; for nothing is more unlike Christ than sin. Because Jesus hates sin, the more like Him you grow the more you will grow to hate sin. And the more you hate sin, the more you will grieve whenever you realize that you have embraced that which killed your Savior.

Perhaps the world has never seen a man closer to Christ than the apostle Paul in the final years of his life. And yet, having grown into such a universally recognized example of Christlikeness, having audibly heard the voice of the Lord Himself on several occasions (see Acts 9:1-6; 18:8-10), having been given the privilege of glimpsing the glories of Heaven itself (see 2 Corinthians 12:2-4), Paul wrote in one of his final letters, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Timothy 1:15). If, as I am sure he did, Paul believed this sincerely, then he could not say it coldly. He meant every word of it with a breast-beating grief over his sin.

I once heard seminary professor John Hannah say, “The closer

one comes to Christ, in one sense the more miserable he becomes.”² Those who have a Holy-Spirit-implanted love for holy truth, holy things, and the Holy One can’t help but feel miserable when they are reminded of that which is unholy within them. Sometimes the growing Christian sinks under a sense of sin so miserable that he wishes he could tear open his chest, rip out his sin-blackened heart, and fling it as far from himself as possible.

But the fact that there is a struggle with sin, and a sense of grief because of sin, is good. Unbelievers have no such struggles or griefs. They may disappoint themselves for not living up to their own standards or to the standard of someone they respect. But they do not agonize over being unholy before God—a God who is holy and who calls them to holiness (see 1 Peter 1:15). As A. W. Pink explained, “It is not the absence of sin but the grieving over it which distinguishes the child of God from empty professors [of faith].”³

Are you aware of sins in your life that you weren’t cognizant of years ago, even though you were committing those sins back then as well? As discouraging as the fresh exposure is, and as grievous as it may be to have ever-deeper layers of sin laid bare, there’s something positive here. Increased sensitivity to your sin is a mark of growth. You’ve made spiritual progress beyond where you were years ago because back then you didn’t even realize that those *were* sins. The closer you come to the light of Christ, the more sins His holy light will expose in you. In the words of nineteenth century Bible scholar Thomas D. Bernard, “Our sense of sin is in proportion to our nearness to God.”⁴

Edwards was right: “The more a true saint loves God . . . the more he mourns for sin.”⁵

SHOULD I CONTINUALLY GRIEVE OVER SIN?

A longtime friend of my wife and I sent an e-mail recently. In it she wondered:

Is it good to always be so aware of my sin rather than focusing solely on the love and grace of God? After all, isn't that counterproductive now that we have been forgiven? And if someone has a tendency to be overly introspective or easily discouraged, can't the frequent thought of your sinfulness push you too far toward guilt and gloom?

Excessive introspection is itself a sinful possibility. But the spirit of the age certainly doesn't incline us to go to extremes in brooding over our sin. Even at church, religious entertainment characterizes more "worship" services than conviction of sin. Sermons are much more likely to be described as upbeat than heart-searching. Guffaws are far more common in church than tears, whether tears of joy *or* of repentance.

True, the correct proportion must be assigned to both the occasions of sin in a Christian's life and the incomparable freedom of forgiveness and grace he has through Christ. It is also true that many ministers and churches overemphasize the wrath of God and the sinfulness of people, including God-forgiven people. Nevertheless, amid all the error or overemphasis on sin a person may have experienced, and despite all the joy in the Lord that should characterize a Christian, the truth remains that the more a believer in Christ experiences growth, the more he grieves over sin. As Edwards put it in *Religious Affections*: "One great difference between saints and hypocrites is this, that the joy and comfort of the former is attended with godly sorrow and mourning for sin."⁶

Jesus Himself describes true Christians not only as those who *have* mourned over their sin, but also as those who are *still* mourning: "Blessed are those who mourn [present tense], for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). This is not to say that Christians should be mourning their sin every moment, but it does mean that they should grieve over it all their lives. We do not read of the apostle Paul endlessly lamenting his sin. Often we

find him greatly rejoicing, not grieving, such as when we read of him singing praise to God at midnight with Silas in the Philippian jail (see Acts 16:25). On the other hand, he wouldn't think of himself near the end of his life as the "chief" sinner on the planet unless there had been much private grief over the sins that prompted such a claim.

There is a widely mistaken notion that repentance and faith in Christ are once-only events. Thereafter, when hearing of these matters, we tend to think, "I've done that." But Christians are *lifelong* repenters and *lifelong* believers. The initial experiences of turning from sin and trusting in Christ should characterize every Christian every day to some extent. Not that the new birth should occur daily for the child of God, for that happens only once. Rather the first experiences of those newly born again—repentance and faith—are the daily stuff of Christian living.

Jeremiah Burroughs, one of the most beloved of the seventeenth-century English Puritan preachers, elaborates in his book on sin, *The Evil of Evils*:

There's a great mistake in the world in the matter of trouble for sin. They think repentance or mourning for sin is but one act, that if once they have been troubled for sin they need never be troubled anymore. It is a dangerous mistake, for we need to know that true sorrow for sin, true repentance, is a continual act that must abide all our lives. And it is not only at that time when we are afraid that God will not pardon our sins, when we are afraid that we shall be damned for our sins, but when we come to hope that God will, yes, when we come to know that God has pardoned our sins.⁷

Because, therefore, a Christian is always looking afresh to Christ and often turning from sin, it follows that he would often grieve over the presence of this sin. Would true repentance, simply by virtue of its frequency, become heartless and mechanical?

God forbid! Lifelong repentance of sin implies some measure of lifelong grief for sin.

THE RIGHT AND WRONG WAY TO GRIEVE OVER SIN

In 2 Corinthians 7:8-11 the Bible juxtaposes two kinds of sorrow for sin: one that is expressed “in a godly manner” and then a “sorrow of the world.” The passage contrasts the “godly sorrow” as the kind that by God’s grace leads to salvation with the worldly sorrow that does not result in biblical repentance. Even unbelievers can grieve over sin, but without it being “in a godly manner,” that is, without it leading to the proper end—repentance and its fruits. Still, as those who have experienced the “godly sorrow” that leads to eternal life, believers can either grieve over sin as Christians ought, or improperly as worldlings do.

Godly sorrow is much more than admitting your imperfections. I’ve never met anyone who considered himself perfect, but relatively few are often brokenhearted because they know themselves to be nonstop offenders against the Law of God. Many professing Christians show no more sorrow for sin on their occasional or perfunctory confessions to God than a boy forced to say “I’m sorry” to his sister. As a child of God, should we feel no more deeply about our sin than this? Godly sorrow for sin does involve *sorrow*.

Godly sorrow also results in repentance, that is, a change of mind about the sin that produces a change of behavior. The apostle Paul had written to the Christians in Corinth regarding sin and he later rejoiced in this result: “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry [only], but that your sorrow led to repentance” (2 Corinthians 7:9). Contrast their grief for sin with the kind manifested by Esau, the brother of the Old Testament patriarch Isaac: “He could bring about no change of mind though he sought the blessing with tears” (Hebrews 12:17, NIV). Like Esau,

we may weep with regret over our sins and yet have no change of mind and life, no real repentance. Godly sorrow involves true sorrow, but true sorrow without true repentance is not godly sorrow.

In addition, sorrow for sin that is “in a godly manner” is genuinely humble. Edwards reflected on how some who use the most self-effacing language to describe their sinfulness may also be the most proud:

“I am a poor vile creature,” they may say, “I am not worthy of the least mercy, or that God should look upon me! Oh, I have a dreadful wicked heart! My heart is worse than the devil! Oh, this cursed heart of mine, etc.” Such expressions are very often used, not with a heart that is broken. . . . There are many that are full of expressions of their own vileness, who yet expect to be looked upon as eminent and bright saints by others, as their due.⁸

Godly sorrow in the growing Christian makes him a thousand times more aware of his pride than his humility. It sometimes causes him to wonder how God’s saving grace and such pride could dwell in the same heart. His grief is such that he feels himself to be “less than the least of all the saints” (Ephesians 3:8), not a great one at all.

In the worldly sort of grief for sin, the focus is on self. Like Esau, it may betray self-pity over what has been lost as a consequence of sin (see Genesis 25:27-34; 27:36-38). It may reveal self-disappointment over the failure to keep one’s own standards or those of one’s family or church. Worldly sorrow may even include a self-centered fear of God’s wrath or of hell. While it’s right to fear these, they may be feared only out of concern for self and without any thought of God, without any grief over having offended God.

All worldly grief over sin is itself sin because its main interest is selfward. Against this, Burroughs wrote:

The chief of all is the humiliation of the soul for sin as it is against God. Then is the heart humbled rightly for sin when it apprehends how, by sin, the soul has been against the infinite, glorious First-Being of all things. All other humiliations in the world are not sufficient without this. For it is not deep enough. There can be no humiliation deep enough unless the soul is humbled for sin because it has sinned against God.⁹

King David was a great sinner, but God called him “a man after My own heart” (Acts 13:22) because he was also a great repenter. Notice the God-centeredness of his grief: “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge” (Psalm 51:4). The entire Psalm is addressed to God and overflows with thirty-one specific references to Him in just nineteen verses. As David’s example shows, godly sorrow is *Godward* sorrow. And when our focus is on God and not self, we can hope for grace and pray expectantly with David, “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit” (Psalm 51:12).

There is another measure of gentle sweetness in a Christian’s godly grief over sin. Godly sorrow is the misery of a lover pinning for what will be. We grieve over our sin partly because we long so for a holiness that is coming, but not yet. Paul writes in Romans 8:23, “We also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.” The presence of the Holy Spirit in an unholy creature causes longings for what we are promised but do not have—thoroughly holy hearts and holy minds living in holy bodies. Because of His residence, we groan over every painful reminder that holiness is not yet, that we are still awaiting what God has destined us to become—the likeness of His sinless Son (see Romans 8:29-30).

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I DO NOT GRIEVE OVER SIN?

John Owen ventured, “I do not understand how a man can be a true believer in whom sin is not the greatest burden, sorrow, and trouble.”¹⁰ If you are not sure your experience resonates with Owen’s statement, consider the following recommendations:

Make sure you understand the gospel of the New Testament.

I’m always amazed at how many churchgoing people are unclear on the gospel. Write it out, as if you were putting it in a letter or e-mail. Think paragraph or page length, not a sentence or two. In this instance, give special attention to two parts of the gospel: that which made the death of Jesus necessary, and the relationship of repentance to faith.

Ask God to show you the reality of your sin. Ask Him to show you specifics of how you sin, when you sin, where you sin, why you sin, and against whom you sin.

Pray slowly through Psalm 51, making it your own heartfelt prayer. Remember that these words are more than just David’s words. God Himself inspired them (see 2 Timothy 3:16), and He preserved them as an example of grief over sin. Pray through these words until they become a reflection of your own heart.

Meditate on the fact that it was your sin that nailed the holy, sinless One from Heaven to the cross. Are you never sorrowful for causing the death of Jesus? Think of what your sin cost the most pure, loving, and gracious One who ever lived. Consider how others are now in hell for the same sins you’ve committed. Remember that it is the eternal and perfect law of God Himself that you have so willingly and repeatedly broken and disregarded. Realize that your every sin is a double sin because every sin is also a failure to keep the greatest of all commandments—to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Mark 12:28-30). “Behold the Man” (John 19:5) your sins have pierced. Then remember that the life and death of Jesus saves from sin all who repent and believe. Be driven

closer to Christ by your sin. May your sin only serve to cause you to prize Christ even more.

Preach the gospel to yourself every day. I've borrowed this phrase from Jerry Bridges, who wrote:

To preach the gospel to yourself, then, means that you continually face up to your own sinfulness and then flee to Jesus through faith in His shed blood and righteous life. It means that you appropriate, again by faith, the fact that Jesus fully satisfied the law of God, that he is your propitiation, and that God's holy wrath is no longer directed toward you. . . . You can be sure of one thing, though: When you set yourself to seriously pursue holiness, you will begin to realize what an awful sinner you are. And if you are not firmly rooted in the gospel and have not learned to preach it to yourself every day, you will soon become discouraged and will slack off in your pursuit of holiness.¹¹

From this perspective of grieving for sin, there are two ways to evaluate your life—proximity to the ideal or progress toward it. You can look at what you ought to be—Christlike—and be discouraged because you are so far from it. Too much measuring yourself by the perfection of Jesus will dishearten you. Too little can breed spiritual pride. But you can also look at how far by God's grace you've come, and be hopeful. In the life of the growing Christian, there are times for both.

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