

HOW CAN I change?

VICTORY IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SIN

C.J. MAHANEY AND ROBIN BOISVERT

Executive Editor: Greg Somerville

This life, therefore,
is not righteousness but growth in righteousness,
not health but healing,
not being but becoming,
not rest but exercise.
We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it;
the process is not yet finished but it is going on.
This is not the end but it is the road;
all does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified.

— Martin Luther



SOVEREIGN GRACE™ MINISTRIES
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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

How Can I Change?, like each book in the Pursuit of Godliness series, is designed for group and individual use. The series is the logical outgrowth of four deeply held convictions:

- The Bible is our infallible standard for faith, doctrine, and practice. Those who resist its authority will be blown off course by their own feelings and cultural trends.
- Knowledge without application is lifeless. In order to be transformed, we must apply and practice the truth of God's Word in daily life.
- Application of these principles is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. While we must participate in change, he is the source of our power.
- The church is God's intended context for change. God never intended for us to live isolated from or independent of other Christians. Through committed participation in the local church, we find instruction, encouragement, correction, and opportunities to press on toward maturity in Christ.

As you work through these pages, we trust each of these foundational convictions will be reinforced in your heart.

With the possible exception of the "Group Discussion" questions, the format of this book is equally suited for individuals and small groups. A variety of different elements have been included to make each chapter as interesting and helpful as possible. For those of you who can't get enough of a particular topic, we've listed at the end of each chapter one or more additional books that will help you grow in the Lord.

While you are encouraged to experiment in your use of this book, group discussion will be better served when members work through the material in advance. And remember that you're not going through this book alone. The Holy Spirit is your tutor. With his help, this book has the potential to change your life.

FOREWORD

When I was a junior in high school, it was required that everyone be timed in a long-distance run. Normally I would have turned in a marginal performance, if that. But this time I decided to put all my effort into the ordeal.

Don't misunderstand—though not an outstanding athlete, I usually held my own, and was willing to work at other sports. But distance running was different. It was hard. Not complex—just hard. It meant pain, and I wasn't into pain. As a matter of fact, during a cross-country unit in gym class, my friends and I, out of sight of our instructor, would regularly jog a shortened course that took us through the high school building, down the hall where the typing classes were held, and out again onto the field. We knocked about a quarter mile off the course that way until the typing teacher got wise to the thundering hoofbeats disturbing his class.

But this time I decided to try my best. So, summoning all my inner fortitude, I pushed myself beyond measure and turned in a remarkable performance. So remarkable, in fact, that the cross-country coach heard about it and tried to recruit me for the team. I responded to him the same way I had when my mother suggested I take ballet lessons along with my sisters: “No thanks.”

“But Robin,” she said, “boys dance ballet, too.”

Not this boy.

I felt like I was going to die at the end of that race, and for obvious reasons. I'd done nothing to train for the race—couldn't be bothered—so I wasn't in shape to persevere.

Twenty-five years later, I've gained a new respect for distance running. It's one of the best analogies for understanding the Christian life, as we see so clearly in Scripture:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, *and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* (Heb 12:1, emphasis added)

This great cloud of witnesses includes those heroic men and women of biblical history—such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses—who ran their races faithfully (Heb 10).

While there are other helpful illustrations of the Christian life in Scripture, the distance race motif provides much food for thought. Such a race requires perseverance. It requires discipline and training. It requires an eye on the goal. And even though it's not particularly complicated, successful distance runners have been among our more intelligent athletes. They are able to marshal their resources and focus them on the task at hand, one step at a time.

We have written this book for runners—Christian men and women sincerely interested in running the race marked out for them. To those who have tried and failed and are about to give it up as hopeless, we offer encouragement. Having done our share of stumbling along the road, we've consistently found that the One who calls us to run is faithful. His Word and Spirit are available to us. Not only that, but he has a compassionate interest in our success. “A bruised reed he will not break,” said the prophet

Isaiah, “and a smoldering wick he will not put out” (Is 42:3). When you are so bent over you’re sure you’ll snap, when your fire has just about gone out, he is there to revive you.

To those who may feel they have reached a comfortable degree of success in living the Christian life, we offer an exhortation. The prophet warned his hearers, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion!” (Am 6:1 NAS). Such an attitude is extremely dangerous, for when we think we have a grip on holiness, we are the more inclined to relax and trust in ourselves rather than God. At that point it usually takes a crisis to bring us back to reality.

Finally, this book is for those who simply desire to grow as Christians, who are content in Christ but not satisfied in themselves. Perhaps you’re frustrated with your progress. Perhaps you’re unsure where to begin. Perhaps you’ve run for many miles and simply need a second wind. We believe this book will help.

In a day when quick solutions to longstanding problems are too easily offered, we wish to recommend the old paths, having found them tried and true. There is no short course to Christian maturity. There is no crossless way to follow Christ, no instant secret to the Christian life. But like distance running, if the way of the cross is not easy, neither is it complicated. God presents us with a pathway that is narrow yet straight. He makes his ways plain to those who are sincerely interested in following him, and he will show himself strong on behalf of all whose hearts are fully his.

Our goal in introducing the doctrine of sanctification (that’s the best we could hope to do in a book this size) is that we might be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Ro 8:29). And from the outset we stress the fact that God’s Spirit is the One who transforms us (2Co 3:18). Although our vigorous effort is required, all growth is by his grace. With that wonderful truth as our starting block, let us press on toward the mark, each confident that “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Php 1:6).

— Robin Boisvert

*“And we, who with
unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory,
are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory,
which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

(2 Corinthians 3:18)