

# *Devotional Doctrine*

Delighting in God,  
His Word, and His World

Aaron  
Armstrong

THE  
**GOSPEL**  
PROJECT

“Aaron’s explanations of key Christian doctrine sparkle with passion and devotion—a testament to the life-transforming power of biblical truth. Whether you’re looking for an introduction to key doctrines or a refresher on what Christians believe, you’ll be inspired by Aaron’s work!”

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**Chelsea Patterson Sobolik**, Author of *Longing for Motherhood*

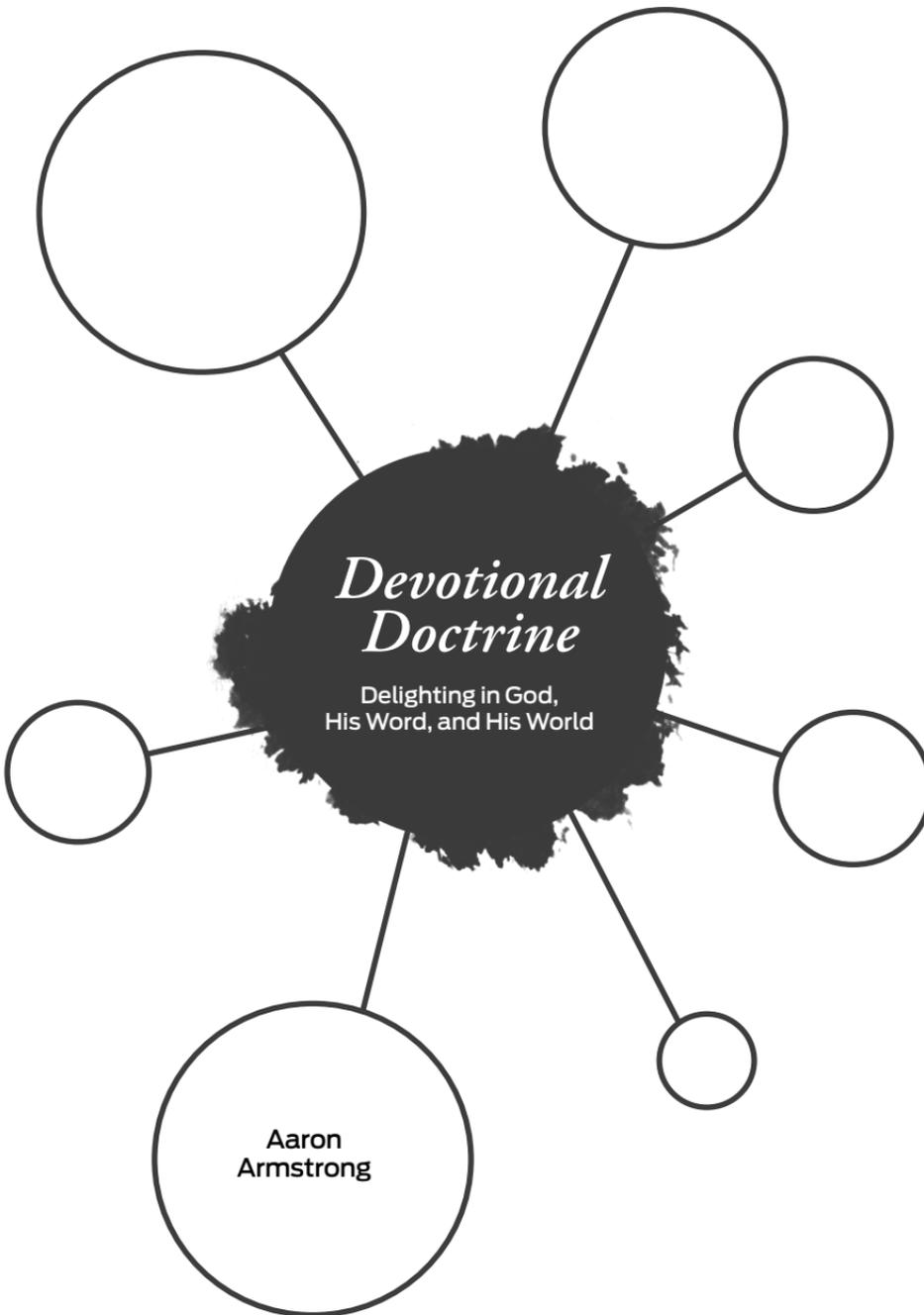
“Too many Christians think theology is the discipline only of academics and nerdy Bible study people. But theology is the study of the God we claim to love and the Jesus to whom we’ve committed our lives. I can’t think of a better resource for the church than this readable, practical book that helps everyday people learn theology and grow in their devotion to Jesus. It explains theology in a way that is readable, enjoyable, and drives the reader to worship. I hope pastors distribute liberally in their churches.”

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**Mike Leake**, Lead Pastor, First Baptist Church, Marionville, MO





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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

The Gift of Theology .....	7
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## God's Revelation

1. Show and Tell .....	12
2. God Gave Us a Book .....	17
3. Faithful, Trustworthy, and Clear .....	21

## God

4. Our Otherworldly yet Knowable God .....	26
5. The Indescribable Being of God .....	30
6. God Is Bigger and Better Than You Think.....	37

## Creation

7. The Point We Miss in the Creation Story .....	43
8. What Makes a Person a Person? .....	47
9. The Answer to the Problem of Evil .....	51
10. God Is Always at Work .....	56
11. The Supernatural Beings Next Door .....	61

## Fall

12. Sinners at War with a Loving God.....	67
13. We Are Not as Free as We Were Meant to Be .....	72
14. The Mess We Made of Everything .....	76

## Redemption

15.	What Is the Gospel? .....	81
16.	The Strangest Thing Christians Believe .....	85
17.	The One Mediator Who Will Never Fail .....	89
18.	The Strange Beauty of Death .....	94
19.	The God Who Is Always with Us .....	100
20.	The E-Word .....	105
21.	You Must Be Born Again .....	108
22.	Imperfectly Becoming Perfect .....	112

## The Church

23.	The One and Manyess of the Church .....	118
24.	The Secret of Spiritual Maturity.....	122
25.	A Bigger View of Worship .....	126
26.	The Meaning of Marriage .....	131
27.	Go Forth, Timid Evangelists .....	135

## Restoration

28.	The Question Everyone's Asking .....	140
29.	The Moment We're All Waiting For .....	144
30.	The World We Can't Imagine .....	147

## Conclusion

	Further Up and Further In .....	151
	Endnotes .....	153

## *Introduction*

# The Gift of Theology

It's G. K. Chesterton's fault. One of the first Christian books I read as a new believer was *Orthodoxy*. I'm still not entirely certain what motivated me to pick this book up—I could have chosen any number of other titles—but this was the one. I devoured it, leaving nary a page unmarked. My mind was on fire as I read each sentence. I didn't understand most of what I read (Chesterton tends not to make it easy for his readers), but I didn't care. Whatever else you could say about what he wrote, he was excited. Passionate. He believed what he wrote, and I wanted more.

It's J. I. Packer's fault. A friend told me I needed to read his book *Knowing God*, that it would change my life. It took me months to read, each page a rich meal. The words of a man who knew much *about* God and also *knew* God intimately. Who wanted his readers to know that “the width of our knowledge about [God] is no gauge of the depth of our knowledge of him.”<sup>1</sup>

It's C. S. Lewis' fault. *Mere Christianity* was in my hands, a book I didn't know existed until a friend recommended I read it. Lewis, in my mind, was the author of a wonderful children's book I read as an eight-year-old. But this was no fairytale. It was the work of a man whose delight was found in working his way “through a tough bit of theology.”<sup>2</sup> A man captivated by big questions, even bigger ideas, and a God simply too glorious for him to fully comprehend.

Chesterton, Packer, and Lewis. These are three of the men to blame for creating in me a hunger for something I never knew I wanted. A

wonderful gift that has sustained me throughout some of the most difficult times of my adult life. A deep love of theology, a love not fixed merely on gaining knowledge about God for the sake of accumulating knowledge but knowing God to glorify Him. A love I want to share with you.

## The Most Helpful Definition of Theology I've Ever Seen

But what do I mean by *theology*? At the most basic level, theology means “words about God.”<sup>3</sup> So by theology, I simply mean what you understand and believe about God. Yes, it involves digging deep into difficult and sometimes obscure subjects, but theology is not a purely academic pursuit reserved for seminary classrooms. Theology matters in every area of life. It is practical.

And that word—*practical*—is really important. It is a reminder that theology is something lived out. Chesterton, Packer, and Lewis all understood this, just as the authors of Scripture did. And this is probably why I think John Frame offers one of the most helpful definitions of theology I've ever seen: “the application of God's Word by persons to all areas of life.”<sup>4</sup> Think about that:

- “The application of God's Word.” Theology is not something we add to the Bible. We don't carry theological beliefs to God's Word. Instead, theology is what we draw *from* the Bible as we seek to live faithfully as believers.
- “By persons.” Each one of us is responsible for applying the Bible to life. We are all theologians, as many have said before.
- “To all areas of life.” Just as we are all theologians, *everything* is theological. There is no area of life left unaffected by what we believe about God.

## Doctrine That Shapes Devotion

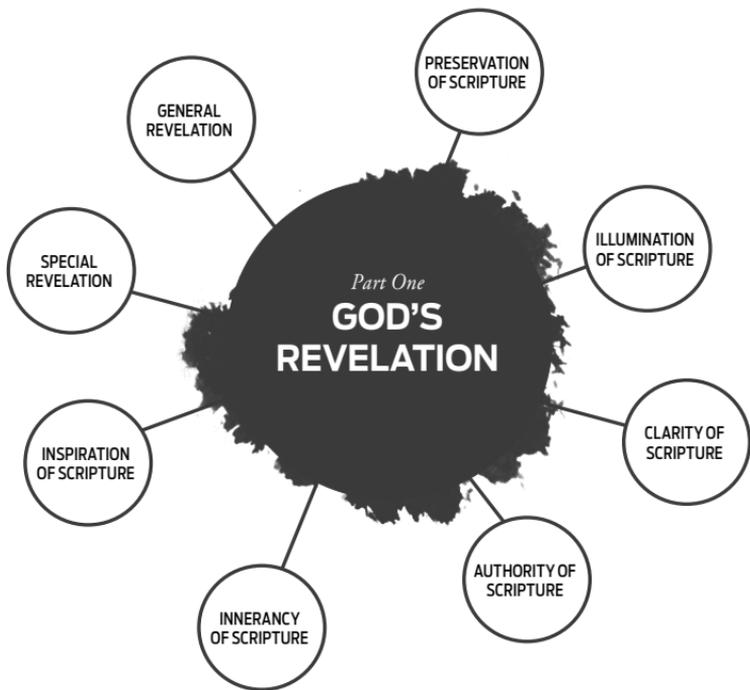
I know many people who would struggle with this definition of theology from two perspectives. Some doubt theology's value altogether. They haven't seen how our doctrine shapes devotion. From their vantage point, doctrine seems to divide more than it causes us to delight in God. Let's call them skeptics. Others believe doctrine has value. They relish knowing more about God. I'll call them the already convinced. For them, the issue isn't in the knowing. Their struggle—and in the interests of full disclosure, *my* struggle—is not to *stop* pursuing knowledge of God (which itself is a good thing) but to delight in that knowledge and the application of it. In seeing our doctrine move from the head to the heart, and from the heart to the hands.

This book is written for both of these: the skeptic and those already convinced.

- For the skeptic, my aim is straightforward: I want to take you on a journey, introducing you to 99 of the most important truths of the Christian faith in chapters designed to be read in just a few minutes. As you explore these doctrines, I would encourage you to reflect on what you *already* believe about each of them, to spend time in God's Word alongside this book, and to consider how each might help you grow in your love for Christ.
- For the convinced, my aim is equally simple: I want to remind you of the great God we serve and the gospel that saves us. To show you how every truth ultimately draws us to Christ, whether it's the creation of the cosmos, the nature of the Bible, or the promise of the new creation to come. To write about God in a such a way that stirs your affections—helping you move what you *know* about God to how you *feel* about God and how you *live* for God.

Ultimately, my hope for every reader, whether the skeptic or the convinced, is that all will see that theology draws us “further up and further in[to]” the Christian life.<sup>5</sup> Theology—applying God’s Word to all areas of life—is used by the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Christ moment by moment. Theology binds us together with other believers in a community of faith that spans time and space. Theology challenges us to keep spreading the good news of the gospel until there’s no one left to hear it.

That’s what each reader, and the one writing, needs to get from this book. Because when we get it, it really does change everything.



*“The grass withers, the flowers fade,  
but the word of our God remains forever.”*

*—Isaiah 40:8*

1.

## Show and Tell

I don't know why, but it took me a long time to figure out that Show and Tell requires great vulnerability. Think about it: kids are asked to bring an object from home to show their classmates and explain why it is special to them. They're asked to reveal something of their innermost self—what they love, what they enjoy, what matters to them.

On one level, I've always kind of known this. As a kindergartener, I loved being able to share a favorite book or toy<sup>6</sup> with the other kids, especially if they thought it was cool. But if it wasn't a hit? I was devastated (at least until recess). But it took until my eldest child was five before the vulnerability of Show and Tell really clicked. My daughter always wanted to bring the same thing to school every Show and Tell day: her beloved stuffed cat, Hershey. This was her most prized possession and dearest companion that traveled with her everywhere she went. In bringing it, she was revealing something of herself to her classmates and taking a big risk in the process. What if the other kids teased her? What if they thought her cat was just an old toy?

Show and Tell was risky when we were kids, but it didn't end when we got out of primary school. As adults, we still play this game; we just don't call it Show and Tell any longer. Instead, we call it status updates. We present an image of ourselves for others to see with good news, clever quips, and carefully composed photos because we want to be known. No, we *need* to be known, even as we so often attempt to

hide in the process. We reveal ourselves, even if what we reveal is only an idealized version of ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

The truth is that our motives in desiring to be known are, at best, mixed. Our pride and insecurity determine so much of what we do and don't share. At the same time, being known is a legitimate desire, one that exists because God gave it to us. And it is a desire He shares, although His is not borne out of any sort of need of His own but to satisfy our need to know Him. God shows and God tells. God is continually revealing Himself to all of His creation—and He does so in two ways.

## The Creator Shows

The first way God reveals Himself is through all that He has made. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands” (Ps. 19:1). The vastness of the universe, with all of its variety and splendor, and the intricate and observable orderliness with which it operates reveal to us the existence of God (Rom. 1:19-20). We see that this God is all-powerful and wise. He is orderly. He loves beauty and is attentive to detail. We can infer all of this simply by looking around us. Consider the majesty of Niagara Falls (the Canadian side, at least) or the breathtaking beauty of a sunset in Middle Tennessee in September. If you want to get daring, look at the Hubble Telescope's photo of the core of the Crab Nebula.<sup>8</sup>

Even you and I are signposts for our Creator, despite the fact that we're all walking train wrecks who say and do and think things we'd never want to appear on a billboard or on Twitter. We are all hardwired as moral beings; we know there is such a thing as right and wrong. Our innate morality points us to the existence of a determiner of right and wrong. The world around us is jaw-droppingly beautiful, and people, despite all of our terribleness, are amazing, both in form and function.

Creation is a glorious sight to behold and a testament to its Creator.

## The Creator Tells

God shows us His “invisible attributes”—His “eternal power and divine nature”—in the things that He has made (Rom. 1:20). There is ample evidence of His existence in creation, and we can know something of what He is like. But it is only a general knowledge of God. We don’t really know Him just by what He has revealed through the world. We only know enough to render us without excuse for not acknowledging Him. And because we don’t, we stand condemned in our sin and rebellion against our Creator (Rom. 2).

God wants more for us than just to know *about* Him; He wants us to *know* Him. He doesn’t want to condemn us but to redeem us. So He reveals Himself in a second way—by speaking. All throughout human history, God has revealed Himself to us at different times and in different ways:

- Through historical events (Dan. 2:21).
- Through His Word, delivered through and written down by the prophets and apostles (2 Pet. 3:2).
- Supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature” (Heb. 1:3).

This revelation, which is compiled for us in the Bible we hold in our hands, helps us move beyond knowing *about* Him in a general sense to *knowing* Him in a personal sense. We learn of His character and nature. We know His will and purpose for creation. We discover His extravagant love for us as He reveals His plan of redemption. And we can know Him and be spared from condemnation by trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

## The Creator Is Still Speaking

During a small group meeting a number of years ago, I remember one of our members saying she wished God still spoke the way He did in the past. As we explored this together, I realized that what she meant was she wished God would speak to us directly *apart* from the Scriptures. She felt as though the Bible wasn't really enough. It slowly dawned on me that she wasn't alone. Some believers struggle with a disconnect between what they see in the Bible and what they experience. Because we don't see God revealing Himself the way He did in the Old Testament, there is a temptation to believe He is no longer involved with us, unless He is going to say something new. But with this perspective, what my friend and so many of us risk missing is that although God *has* revealed all He intends to reveal to us, it doesn't mean He has stopped speaking. He continues to show His power and glory in the things He has made. He continues to tell us of His character and nature, His will and commands, in His Word. He is still revealing His great love for us in Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. And He will continue to tell us of these things until the day we stand before Him when all things are made new.

God is not silent. He is still speaking today. And all who have ears to hear listen (Mark 4:9).

## Study and Meditate

Psalms 8; 19; Romans 1:19-20; 2; 2 Peter 3:2; Hebrews 1:1-3

## Doctrines to Explore

- General Revelation
- Special Revelation

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Have you ever wondered if God still speaks to us today? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the ways you see God's power and attributes on display in creation?
3. If God's existence is revealed in creation, why do so many people believe He doesn't exist?

2.

## God Gave Us a Book

It's rare to find someone who says they're a Christian who doesn't respect the Bible. Don't get me wrong, some have decidedly *unique* takes on what this book is, how it came to be, and its role in our lives. For example, some see the Bible as:

- a record of one people group's evolving understanding of God;<sup>9</sup>
- a book of wisdom or morality tales, not unlike Aesop's Fables;<sup>10</sup> or
- a sacred text carrying the same weight as the Quran, the Buddhist Tipitaka, or the Bahá'í's Kitáb-i-Aqdas.<sup>11</sup>

Every generation wrestles with how to understand the Bible. Not just what it is about but also what its purpose is. Often the wrestling leads people to respect and honor the Bible but doubt its trustworthiness as a revelation of God's will and character. Essentially, what they wind up with is a book that's pretty much like any other. They can embrace the parts they find helpful and toss the rest.

### What Kind of Book Is the Bible, Really?

I'm going to be honest here: I don't get these attempts to redefine the Bible. They don't make sense to me. (This may have something to do with me coming to faith as an adult, an experience in which reading the Bible played a critical role.) The reason redefining the Bible doesn't make sense is because it ignores what the Bible says about the Bible.

The Bible describes itself as “inspired,” that is, God directed the original human authors of the Scriptures in such a way that their writings were His message to humanity. Sometimes God explicitly said to them, “Write this down,” or, “Thus says the Lord,” as in the Law and the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah. More often, though, God inspired the Bible through a kind of supernatural influence, with the Holy Spirit working through the personalities, grammar, and perspectives of the human authors so that what was written could be considered the very words of God. And throughout history, He has providentially worked to preserve what was written through thousands of manuscript copies, church councils, and controversies so that future generations could know Him and His will.<sup>12</sup> Every book that makes up our Bible, whether Deuteronomy, Obadiah, Luke’s Gospel, or 2 Timothy, is equally inspired. All of them are the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

## Why Inspiration Really Matters

As the Word of God, the Bible is truthful in everything that it teaches, without exception. God is true; therefore, what He says is true. It is a book overflowing with wisdom; it is “profitable” for us, equipping us in every way to live to the glory of God, even if that way seems strange to the world around us (2 Tim. 3:16-17). And if the Bible is indeed the Word of God, what it says is what God says, meaning it has authority. Actually, that isn’t quite right. It’s not precise enough. The Bible doesn’t just have authority; it is the ultimate source of authority for all of creation.

And this, I think, explains the tendency to redefine it. It’s an issue of authority. We’ve built our lives on the belief that we are in authority over our own lives. We’re the masters of our own fate who are pursuing our own truth, and no one can tell us differently. But the Bible tells us something different, a story that we instinctively hate. It tells *the* story

about humanity, one that presents us in a light different than any other book. It doesn't present us as being on a journey of progress or as heroic figures, as any human author naturally would. Instead, when we read the Bible, we discover "we have met the enemy and he is us."<sup>13</sup>

The Bible confronts us with the truth that we are responsible for the problems of this world—and the truth that we don't have all the answers for how to solve them. We aren't good enough, smart enough, or strong enough to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and realize our own potential. We need Someone to rescue us, not just to teach us how to be better people but to make us *new* people. People with a desire to love, honor, and obey the One who created us. People who want to tell the entire world about Him!

And that is exactly why the Bible matters so much, why we need to care about the kind of book it is. An inspired one, an authoritative one that God has preserved for centuries. A book that tells us the truth about ourselves—the truth we don't want to hear—and offers us good news to share with the entire world. It is a book like no other, the most humbling, frustrating, and awe-inspiring book you'll ever read.

But it's the only one that has the answers to all the questions we don't even know to ask.

## Study and Meditate

2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21

## Doctrines to Explore

- Inspiration of Scripture
- Authority of Scripture
- Preservation of Scripture

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What parts of the Bible's teachings do you struggle with most? Why?
2. How does the understanding that all Scripture is equally inspired affect how you read the Bible?
3. In what ways does a renewed understanding of the Bible encourage you to pursue God's mission?

3.

## Faithful, Trustworthy, and Clear

Before I started reading the Bible for the first time, I came in with certain assumptions. I assumed it was a list of commands and moral platitudes that probably didn't have much relevance to my day-to-day, not to mention twenty-first-century Canadian, life. I figured it probably had a bunch of errors. In general, I thought it was a book that would be hard to understand, unreliable, and unhelpful.

Then I read it. Did I find moral proverbs and commands? Yep. But I found something else too. I found a story of the world that made sense, a story of hope for broken people living in a broken world. And I found it in a book I could understand. A book that rang true unlike any other book I'd ever read.

### God's Truly True Word

I'm not alone in both my previously held beliefs nor my later experience. A number of years ago, I had a challenging conversation with a good friend of mine on this subject. I was still fairly new to the Christian faith, and my friend couldn't get past the idea that the Bible is God's Word. Here's how he made the case:

- It was written by human beings. (True.)
- Human beings are imperfect. (True again.)
- Anything we're involved with is going to be imperfect. (Yep.)

- Therefore, the Bible must contain errors, which means it can't be God's Word. (False.)

So why does true plus true plus true equal false? Because it fails to take into account one more vital truth: God's involvement in writing the Scriptures, or what Christians call *inerrancy*.

Christians believe that because God inspired Scripture, He protected it from error on the part of its human authors. Every word they wrote was free from error, without a shred of falsehood or deceit to be found in it in any way.<sup>14</sup> God's supernatural involvement in its writing protected the Scriptures from error. He miraculously prevented human error from seeping into His revelation. Every word is true. And not just sort of true or true only about spiritual realities. What it says about *everything* is true. Truly true, if you'll forgive such poor grammar.

## God Wants Us to Know His Word

There's an assumption that comes with this doctrine, this belief that God's Word is really and truly true: God wants us to understand His Word. Christians believe that as the Holy Spirit worked through human authors to reveal God to us, He made sure this revelation was clear. So clear, in fact, that much of it can be understood with many of the same basic principles of interpretation we use when we read any other book. We intuitively pay attention to context clues, verb tenses, and the literary forms used in the text we're reading.

This doesn't mean it's all equally clear, of course. Some parts are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16); we are, after all, trying to comprehend the infinite God with finite minds. And because of our sinful nature, there are aspects that we are incapable of grasping on our own (1 Cor. 2:14-16). But because God wants us to know His Word, He helps us understand it. During His earthly ministry, Jesus explained

the Scriptures to His disciples (Luke 24:27), but He also opened their minds to *understand* them (vv. 44-45). Today, the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scriptures in our hearts and minds (John 14:15-18; 16:7-15). God helps us understand what we could not otherwise and gives us the desire to be transformed by the truth of His Word.

## Good News for God's Imperfect People

My friend couldn't see that. He still can't. Before the Holy Spirit opened my eyes, I didn't understand it either. The idea that God's Word, the Bible, is true is a struggle for many to believe. But if the Scriptures contain the good news we say it does, let's never be afraid to call it what it is. God's Word is true, not because any human being declared it to be so but because *God* is trustworthy. And because He is trustworthy, we can trust the Word He inspired and helps us to understand (see Matt. 5:18; John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). And as we trust the Word and move forward in sharing the message God has given, we can have confidence that many will come to know and believe.

## Study and Meditate

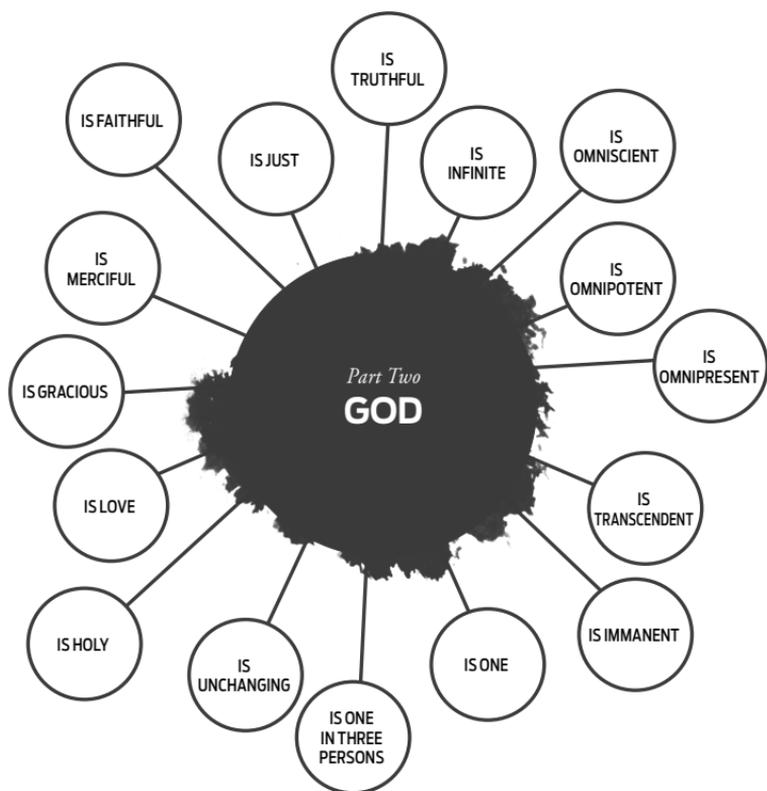
Psalms 19; 119; Luke 24:13-49; John 14:15-18; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

## Doctrines to Explore

- Inerrancy of Scripture
- Clarity of Scripture
- Illumination of Scripture

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What arguments have you heard against the inerrancy of Scripture? How would you respond?
2. What passages of Scripture are most difficult for you to understand? Why?
3. How does the doctrine of illumination (the Holy Spirit opening our minds to understand God's Word) give you confidence in sharing the gospel with non-Christian family and friends?



*“But the LORD is the true God;  
he is the living God and eternal King.”*  
—Jeremiah 10:10a

4.

## Our Otherworldly yet Knowable God

Who or what is God?

If you had asked me this question when I was in my early 20s, I wouldn't have been able to give you a particularly compelling answer, largely because I didn't know. (I also didn't care, but that's another story.) When I became a Christian, I learned that answering this question was really important. While not long ago there was at least some semblance of a shared cultural answer, that's no longer the world in which we live. An atheist friend might say God is a myth our ancestors devised to help make sense of the world or, more cynically, an idea to maintain control over a population and legislate morality. A Muslim coworker might say that God is an otherworldly, supreme being who cannot be known or comprehended by human beings. A spiritual-but-not-religious classmate might say that we all carry the divine in us—in effect, we are all God.

But how do Christians understand God, and why does it really make a difference? At the heart of the unique Christian understanding of God is the concept that God is one yet in three distinct Persons. We call this the doctrine of the Trinity, which describes God's being, His relationship within Himself, and His self-sufficiency (we will look at this concept in more detail shortly). But how does this self-sufficient Being interact with His creation? Christians have two words to help us make sense of this: immanence and transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

## Our Immanent God: Near and Knowable

Everything I've just written only makes sense if God is engaged with His creation. And He is. God reveals Himself to us, which means we can comprehend Him, at least to some degree. God's self-revelation brings Him near and makes Him personal—this is what we mean by *immanence*. God is intimately involved in His creation and particularly so by making humanity in His image. We bear the image of God (a critical concept we will explore in more detail later), which makes us unique from the rest of creation. We see God's intention in this regard in the creation account when He was not content to speak the first man and woman into being as He had spoken all else into being; God instead formed them with His hands (Gen. 2:7,22).

Apparently there is a sense in which this direct formation continues, for the psalmist declares that God “created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb” (Ps. 139:13). It is only fitting that a sovereign, loving God would play a “hands-on” role in the formation of every person since every person is made in His image.

But God's moment-by-moment involvement with us does not end at our birth. It continues throughout our lives. Jesus goes so far as to tell us that God “knows the things you need before you ask him” (Matt. 6:8). He provides for our daily needs, such as what we will eat and drink (Matt. 6:25-34), He equips and empowers us (Acts 1:8), and He is actively working in our lives to make us more like Jesus (Phil. 2:13). Indeed, Jesus Himself is the epitome of the immanence of God, humbling Himself to take on flesh, becoming like us so that He might redeem us. This is not the description of a far-off, unknowable, uninterested divine being. It is instead a glimpse of a close, deeply personal, involved God. God is immanent; He is near and knowable.

## Our Transcendent God: Above and Beyond

Even as God delights to make Himself known to us, we find that we can only know Him in part. The fullness of God's glory is far beyond our perception or ability to comprehend. On earth, what we know of God is truly majestic, but His glory extends beyond the heavens, beyond all we can see and imagine. When we say that God is *transcendent*, we do not deny His immanence, His closeness and personal involvement in creation. The two are not mutually exclusive attributes, which one might think when first hearing of them. Rather, we say that in addition to being nearby, God is infinitely above and beyond His creation. He is not a part of the world in the way that we are, and it is not a part of Him.

While God is infinite in all His attributes, one particular way the Bible underscores this truth is by emphasizing that God is eternal. The Bible never shows us the Creator's starting point, for He has none. Instead, it begins with the starting point of creation. In the beginning, before the foundations of the world were laid, God was (Gen. 1:1). There has never been a time when God was not, nor will there ever be a time when He will not be. He is the God "who was, who is, and who is to come...the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 4:8; 21:6). This is our transcendent God. He is far above and beyond us.

## Overflowing with Beautiful Truth

These two words—immanence and transcendence—are overflowing with beautiful truth. They reveal that the God we Christians talk about is completely unlike any of the competing concepts and deities. The majestic, transcendent God, who exists apart from the world He created, cares deeply about His creation. He cares deeply about you

and me and every other person who has ever lived or will ever live—to the degree that He stepped into creation to rescue us from our sin! No other god did this. No other god could. And no other god is worthy of our praise.

## Study and Meditate

Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 139; Revelation 4; 21; Genesis 1–2; Matthew 5–7; Luke 1–2

## Doctrines to Explore

- God Is Transcendent
- God Is Immanent

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Why does it matter that God is apart from creation?
2. Why does it matter that God is involved with creation?
3. How do these two truths enhance your sense of worship?

5.

## The Indescribable Being of God

A while ago, two Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on my door. They were in my neighborhood sharing literature and attempting to strike up conversations about their religion, which we did. Here's the basic script of one conversation:<sup>16</sup>

1. They wanted me to know that the Bible has an important message for the world; it is full of wisdom.
2. They attempted to steer the conversation to a broader discussion of the world falling apart because of immorality, famine, and war, carefully tying in a relevant recent event from the news.
3. They presented the answers to these problems as being found in obedience to God's commands in the Bible and in a renewed relationship with humanity's Creator through Jesus Christ. All of which, of course, must be understood as defined in the Watchtower Society's resources.

After listening to their explanation, which included a number of Bible passages, I asked, "So, who is Jesus?"

"We believe Jesus is, as he said, 'the way, the truth, and the life,' and no one comes to the Father except through Him. He gave his perfect human life as a ransom sacrifice, and his death and resurrection make it possible for those exercising faith in him to gain everlasting life."

“Sure, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

They paused and looked at each other, as if having a telepathic conversation: *Where is this guy going with this? Not sure; let’s see how it plays out.* I continued, “Well, you’ve said Jesus had a perfect human life, right? So, you believe Jesus was a created being, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, cool. But how can any human being be perfect? Doesn’t the Bible seem to say that’s impossible?”

Suddenly, one of the two missionaries clued in to where I was going. She exclaimed, “The Trinity isn’t taught in the Bible!”

Dang it, I thought. And we hadn’t even gotten to John 1:1 yet.

## There Really Is Only One God

Pondering God’s being has led to some of the most beautiful and inspiring teaching in the church’s history but also some of its greatest controversies and errors. This is because what the Bible teaches about God is, well, kind of strange.

Here’s what I mean. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the biblical authors continually state that there is one God:

- “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29).
- “LORD, there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you” (1 Chron. 17:20).
- “I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God but me” (Isaiah 45:5; cf. Isa. 45:18,21,22; 46:9).
- “I am the LORD your God, and there is no other” (Joel 2:27).
- “There is no God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4).

Today, there are no less than three religions that claim to believe this truth, known as monotheism—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.<sup>17</sup> So for most Westerners, and particularly North Americans, this idea seems pretty straightforward. But in the days of Moses, monotheism was a radical concept. In all the cosmos, there is one God. A God who is not one of many gods, all vying for worship. The biblical authors went to great lengths to depict other gods for what they were: lifeless, useless, powerless. Handcrafted gods that were not worthy of worship but mockery.<sup>18</sup>

## The Mystery of the One God (Who Is in Three Persons)

As we read the Old Testament, God drops hints that His nature is more complicated than we might think.<sup>19</sup> Some of this comes out in language, such as when God speaks singularly and refers to Himself plurally, as in Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.’” Other times it’s situational, such as when Joshua “bowed with his face to the ground in worship” before the commander of the Lord’s army (Josh. 5:13-15). But this isn’t enough to make a definitive statement, so it’s in the New Testament where things get really interesting.

God’s deity and personhood is never truly in question at any point in the New Testament writings. In fact, by and large, they continue to speak of Him in the same way as the Old Testament. The only significant difference is the depiction of God as “Father,” Jesus’ primary name for Him, which is used interchangeably with God throughout the Gospels (see Matt. 6:26-33; Mark 11:22-25; Luke 23:46-47). Then John’s Gospel opens with a dramatic prologue, set before the beginning of time. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God

in the beginning” (John 1:1-2). That same Word, John wrote, came to earth and dwelt among His people, revealing the glory of God as His one and only Son (John 1:14). That “Word”? Jesus.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as being able to do things only God could do—because He was (and is) God (Phil. 2:5-11). For example:

- He had the authority to forgive sin (Mark 2:1-12).
- He had the ability to issue authoritative commands on par with Scripture (Matt. 5:21-48).
- He had power over life and death (John 11).
- He had authority over creation (Matt. 8:23-27).
- He had command over angels (Matt. 13:41) and demons (Matt. 8:28-34).
- He had the right to receive worship as God (John 20:28).

Jesus, the Word, the Son, “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature” (Heb. 1:3), is God, just as much God as the Father, though distinct from Him.

The Holy Spirit, likewise, is called eternal (Heb. 9:14), One who can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), One who convicts (John 16:7-11), and One who acts as a Counselor (John 14:26). And if that weren’t enough, the Holy Spirit is explicitly called “God” in Acts 5:3-4 and 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (see also 6:19-20).

This is the great mystery of God’s nature: God is One, but He is also three—the Father, Son, and Spirit. Each is fully and equally God, yet each Person is distinct from one another. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son nor the Spirit, the Son is not the Father nor the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father nor the Son (Matt. 11:27; John 10:30; 14:16).

And yes, that really *is* the simplest way to explain it.

# The Stuff (Accidental) Heretics Are Made Of

Remember how I said what the Bible teaches about God's nature is the source of some of our greatest controversies and errors? Well, that's because our attempts to explain the mystery of God's three-and-oneness always fall short, as a laundry list of heresies, teachings that deviate from biblical orthodoxy, attests.

One teacher attempted to explain the Persons of the Trinity as "forms" or "modes" of existence, that at certain times God acted in the mode of the Father and at others in the mode of the Son or the Spirit. This heresy, called Modalism or Sabellianism, is alive and well in our own day, as taught by some denominations and churches<sup>20</sup> and expressed in popular books.<sup>21</sup> Another teacher, Arius, tried to explain that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were not co-eternal with God but created divine beings subordinate to God the Father. His heresy, Arianism or Subordinationism, is alive and well in Christian-like cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Another heresy, Tritheism, teaches that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not one but fully separate divine beings. This is what is taught by the Mormons, another Christian-ish religion that isn't remotely Christian.

This is why we shouldn't try to use analogies to describe the Trinity either. They all wind up making us accidental heretics. For example:

- The Trinity is not like water, which exists at different times as gas, liquid, or solid. That's Modalism.
- The Trinity isn't like a star from which light and heat emanate. That's Arianism.
- The Trinity isn't like a family with a mother, father, and child. That's Tritheism.

While analogies might make for entertaining YouTube videos,<sup>22</sup> they make for terrible theology. The Trinity is a grand mystery. God’s revelation of His nature is incomparable—there is literally nothing else like Him in all the universe.

## A Beautiful Mystery to Behold

This is probably the most theologically intense piece you’re going to read in this entire book. And let’s just be honest; it’s tempting to skip over some of this kind of stuff. To put questions about God’s nature in the “I’ll find out when I get there” folder, alongside the problem of evil and why *The Bachelor* has lasted over twenty seasons. But the Trinity really does matter because there is no Christianity without it. For that matter, there are no Christians without the Trinity. Everything about how we “do” Christianity depends on it:

- We read the Bible through a Trinitarian lens and with Trinitarian power. The Bible is the revelation of the Father through the Son by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit helps us understand and rejoice in this revelation to the glory of the Son and the Father.
- We pray with a “Trinitarian grain,” as one author put it. Our prayers run “from the Spirit through the Son to the Father.”<sup>23</sup> We’re not on our own with our prayers bouncing off our ceilings. The Spirit carries our prayers to Jesus the Son, who intercedes on our behalf with the Father.
- We are rescued by and share a gospel that involves every Person of the Trinity. The Father planned for the salvation of sinners incapable of rescuing themselves, loving those who did not first love Him (1 John 4:10). The Son accomplished that salvation through His sinless life, death, and resurrection. And the Spirit applies it to “everyone who believes” (John 3:16), anyone who

calls upon the name of Jesus to be saved, by breathing new life into dead hearts. And we are commissioned to share this good news in the name and power of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19-20).

This is only scratching the surface, of course. But when you begin to look at the world through a Trinitarian lens, it changes everything. Is it a mystery? Absolutely. But it is a beautiful mystery to behold.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 1:26-28; Joshua 5:13-15; John 1:1-18; 14–16; Matthew 28:19-20; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1–10

## Doctrines to Explore

- God Is One
- God Is One in Three Persons

## Reflect and Discuss

1. “There is no Christianity without the Trinity.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Think about any analogies you may have read or heard used to explain the Trinity. Why do they fall short of faithfully describing the Trinity?
3. How might your understanding of the Trinity change the way you pray or share the gospel? How can it be a source of confidence?

6.

## God Is Bigger and Better Than You Think

I love reading fantasy and mythology for fun, especially stories of divine beings interacting with humanity. What's most interesting to me is that the gods in these stories—gods that were worshiped by ancient Germanic people, Greeks, and Romans—were actually pretty terrible. The Norse gods—Odin, Thor, Loki, and the rest—are often scheming against one another, petty, and vindictive. The Greek gods are shockingly bipolar—especially Zeus and Hera—coming to the aid of human heroes one moment with those same heroes serving as the focal point of their ire the next.

The Bible describes gods like these, but it calls them something else: idols (and sometimes demons), useless things that rob their worshipers of their humanity. “They have hands but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throats. Those who make them are just like them, as are all who trust in them” (Ps. 115:7-8). Like the gods of myths and fantasy, the Bible looks at these idols and says they are too small. They don't offer any help. They don't offer any hope. They fall so woefully short in every conceivable way because they're worthless. They are the creations we use to replace our Creator (Rom. 1:22-25).

But the Bible also offers something (or rather, Someone) bigger and better—infininitely so.

## An Infinite God Is the Only True Kind of God

*Infinite* really is the perfect word to sum up everything about God. It points to the absolute lack of boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Ps. 147:5). Time and space place no constraints on Him because He is outside of both. Where we are constrained, or finite, He is not. His knowledge is limitless, extending to the past, present, and future. It is perfect and complete.<sup>24</sup> Because He is not bound by the limitations of time and space, God is literally everywhere simultaneously. He is present with us all the time (even when we'd rather He wasn't).<sup>25</sup> He is not simply more powerful than the most powerful being; He is all-powerful, able to do anything that doesn't contradict His nature, character, and law (so no, God can't create a rock so big that He can't lift it).<sup>26</sup>

An infinite God is the only true kind of God. There is no other god like this One. And it gets better still.

## A Holy God Is the Only Worthy Kind of God

This infinite God is described another way: He is *holy*. This word refers to His uniqueness and “set apart”-ness from all He has created. He is separate from all He has made in that He was not made and exists outside of creation. But it also refers to His moral character. *Holy*, in this sense, refers to His moral purity. In a word, He is perfect:

- He is perfectly faithful. He will always keep His word and fulfill His promises, notably His promise to rescue and redeem those who trust in Jesus (1 Thess. 5:24).
- His judgments are always right, uncompromised, and in accordance with His righteous standards (Ps. 119:137).

- He is trustworthy because in Him there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), and He is the embodiment of truth, being the source of truth (John 14:6).
- His love is a reflection of His very essence, the perfect love that resides and resonates within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit (John 5:20; 2 Cor. 13:13).
- His grace and mercy are perfect, rooted in His holiness. God delights in giving unmerited favor (grace) and showing compassion to undeserving people like you and me (Eph. 2:8-9), withholding punishment for sin and providing forgiveness for our sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

If God were not holy, we couldn't have any kind of confidence in who He is, what He does, and His ability to rescue us from sin. We could only live in fear. And that's not the kind of God that's worthy of praise. Only a holy God is worthy.

## An Unchanging God Is the Only Reliable Kind of God

God's infinite power, knowledge, and presence are awe-inspiring. His holiness is the foundation of our praise. And these are made even more meaningful by His unchanging nature. God doesn't change who He is ever. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). We can count on God being God no matter what. It's only because God is God that we have good news to believe and share. The God who forgave us isn't going to change His mind. The God who gives rest to those who are weary and heavy laden won't suddenly throw their burdens back upon them. He isn't going to give up on His plan to rescue the world until every last point of it is completed, and to that end, even now He is calling people out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

This is the good news that lets us sleep at night; this is the good news worth believing. An infinite God is the only true kind of God. A holy God is the only worthy kind of God. An unchanging God is the only reliable kind of God. That's the God we have—a God unlike us. Let's go tell everyone!

## Study and Meditate

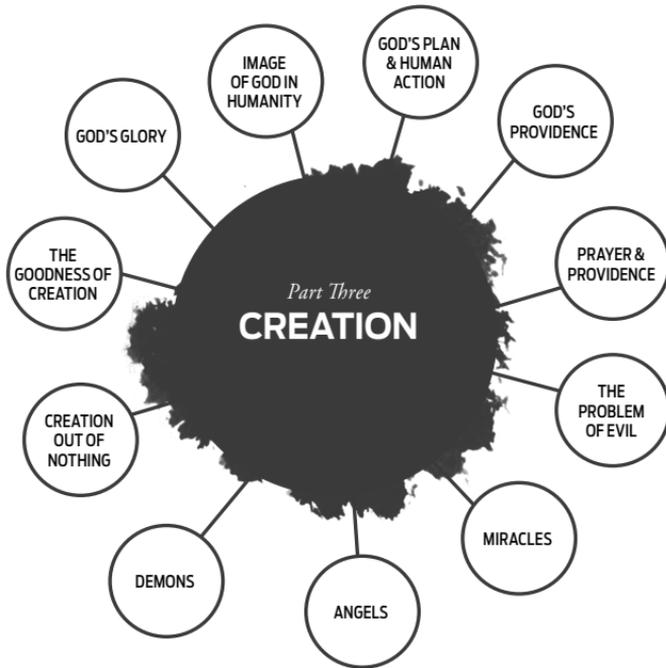
Leviticus 11:44-45; 1 Samuel 15:29; 1 Kings 8:27; Job 11:7-9; Psalms 33:14; 99; 139:7-12; 147:5; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Matthew 18:20; John 14:6; Acts 17:24; Romans 2:5-11; 3:25-26; 6:23; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 5:10,21; Ephesians 2:4-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24; 2 Timothy 2:13; Titus 1:2; 3:5; Hebrews 6:18; 1 Peter 4:19; 1 John 4:8

## Doctrines to Explore

- God Is Unchanging
- God Is Holy
- God Is Love
- God Is Gracious
- God Is Merciful
- God Is Faithful
- God Is Just
- God Is Truthful
- God Is Infinite
- God Is Omniscient
- God Is Omnipotent
- God Is Omnipresent

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What aspect of God's nature is most reassuring for you? Most concerning? Why?
2. Why is it good news for you right now that God is unchanging in His nature and character?
3. How does God's character inspire you to live on mission?



*“You set all the boundaries of the earth;  
you made summer and winter.”  
—Psalm 74:17*

7.

## The Point We Miss in the Creation Story

Think about the last time you heard a sermon or read a book about the opening chapters of the Bible. I'm guessing that somewhere along the way, a debate pitting science against Scripture came up. Maybe with questions like these:

- Are these chapters historical fact or myth?
- Does “day” really mean a 24-hour period of time?
- Do we really have to choose between science and Scripture?

These are questions my wife and I have asked a great deal. Neither of us grew up with Christian parents. We were only taught one view of how life came into being: naturalistic evolution,<sup>27</sup> which says we are the ongoing result of time plus matter plus chance; we are not really unique among other lifeforms, although we have the unique ability to convince ourselves that we're not really unique. When we became believers, we discovered that the Bible challenged this view of ourselves. We started asking hard questions about what we were taught in school and what was assumed by our families. Our study didn't lead us to distrust science in general, but it did help us see that there's something else going on under the surface. The issue of “science vs. Scripture” is more than a debate over biblical interpretation. It's an issue of worldview, an issue of *worship*.

## The Creator and His Creation

Think about the first line of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Right away, we read that there is a God, and before anything else was, this God existed. Everything we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, measure, and hypothesize was created by this God and was originally declared “good.” Because He created everything, this God has authority over it. He gave everything He created purpose. Everything was intended to put His beauty and wonder on display, to give testimony to His “eternal power and divine nature” (Rom. 1:20). More simply, that purpose is to worship, honor, and praise Him because of who He is.

The apostle John built upon the truth of Genesis with the opening words of his Gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). In doing so, he brought to light a profound mystery—that the God who created all things is one but more than one at the same time (something we looked at earlier). Not gods *plural* but God *singular*. A God who exists simultaneously as one and more than one. In the beginning, God created all things, and with Him was the Word, who was and is God, and all things were created through Him. And as if that wasn’t enough, John also wrote that “apart from him not one thing was created that has been created” (John 1:3). This Word came into the world and dwelt among people as a man named Jesus (vv. 14,17).

Other New Testament writers testified to this truth as well. The author of Hebrews called Jesus “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Similarly, Paul called Jesus the One who holds all things together (Col. 1:17). Their point was the same as John’s: Jesus is the Creator and Sustainer of all things; He has authority over all creation and is the One worthy of worship.

## Creation and Its Creator

*That* is the point of the creation story: Because He is its Creator, God is in authority over all creation, including you and me—and *that* is why people are desperate to debunk it. Let's be honest: People don't object to the biblical account of creation because it's ludicrous or intellectually dishonest to believe that a pre-existent God spoke all things into existence. They object because it tells us we are not autonomous beings. If the world came into being through happenstance and we are the lucky result of the equation of time plus matter plus chance successfully adding up again and again and again, then we are beholden to no one. We don't have to worship, and more pointedly obey, someone who isn't real.

But if there is a Creator, then we as created beings are necessarily under this Creator's authority. And to make matters worse, this Creator isn't a distant deity content to let us run amok, doing whatever pleases us. He has a plan for His creation, a design for it. And He calls on people to follow it. God is so personally invested in His creation that when we tried to deviate from His plan—to do our own thing—He revealed Himself to the world by entering into it as the man Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus put His authority over all creation on display. He performed signs and wonders. He calmed storms. He forgave sins. He healed broken bodies. He taught with authority. He overcame death itself! Jesus is the Creator, and someday, “every knee will bow...and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11). In the end, everyone will worship Him.

## Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

This is the point of the creation story. It's the point of the entire Bible. And it's what we always need to keep in mind every time debates

over science and Scripture arise. Christians have nothing to fear from genuine scientific inquiry because although it has been marred by sin, creation is still doing what it was always intended to do. It points us to the One who made all things, the One who is in authority over all things (Ps. 8:1; Rom. 1:19-20). And this gives us more reasons to worship Him.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 1–3; John 1; Romans 1–3; Ephesians 1–2; Colossians 1; Philippians 2; Hebrews 1.

## Doctrines to Explore

- Creation out of Nothing
- The Goodness of Creation
- God's Glory

## Reflect and Discuss

1. How does understanding the foundation of Jesus' authority affect you personally?
2. Where do you see people's rejection of Jesus' authority reflected in your community?
3. What steps can you take to live faithfully in light of this truth and as a witness to the gospel?

8.

## What Makes a Person a Person?

One of my favorite canceled TV shows was a series called *Chuck*. The basic premise was simple: a computer geek working at a big box electronic store downloads a government super-computer into his head, becomes a special agent with the CIA, falls in love with his handler, and saves the world on a weekly basis.

Admittedly, the show required a fair amount of suspension of disbelief. But the writing was fun, the acting was surprisingly strong, and the chemistry between the leads was believable. Something I appreciated about the series is that it (probably unintentionally) asked a profound question: what makes a person a person?

### Are We What We Do?

This question is the question behind the question of every major debate in our culture: abortion, marriage, gender identity, eugenics, cloning, animal-human hybrids, artificial intelligence. Our views on all of these matters say something about what we believe about human beings: what we are, why we exist, and what purpose we serve in the world.

In *Chuck*, humanity is explored as a human brain meshes with a computer, suggesting that it's our memories and experiences that make us who we are. But what happens when we lose these? Are we still who we are or are we somehow less? The same questions become necessary

when we apply any utilitarian approach to identifying the uniqueness of humanity. If we are human because we do X, Y, or Z, then when we can't do those things anymore (or before we can do them), we're not really human, right? (I realize I'm probably overanalyzing a plot device of a TV Comedy-Action-Drama, but stick with me.)

## We Are What Our Creator Says We Are

The problem is a utilitarian approach to defining humanity doesn't work. It's what we see the entire world trying to do every day, but it doesn't make sense. If your identity is based on your job, your education, your intelligence, or your sexuality, you're thinking too small. You're thinking in ways our Creator never intended for us to think. Instead, He gives us a better answer to the question we're asking. And He knows what makes a person a person because He's the One who made us. What He says is that what makes a person a human being is being made in His image.

And therein lies the mystery, doesn't it? What does it mean to be made in God's image, according to His likeness (Gen. 1:26)? The short version is that as God's image bearers, we are mirrors, reflecting God's attributes to the rest of creation in three distinct but complementary ways:

- 1. Our nature.** By virtue of being made like Him, we share characteristics with God, our Creator. We are creative and communicative beings. We are logical and rational beings.<sup>28</sup> We are moral and compassionate beings. These are inherent to our nature, hardwired into our DNA.
- 2. Our actions.** Humanity is given authority and responsibility over the rest of creation. This is what's meant by the terms "rule" and "subdue" (Gen. 1:28). We are to exercise dominion over the earth, harnessing its resources for human flourishing, which naturally encourages creative technological and

scientific development. In our ruling over creation, we not only resemble God using our shared characteristics, but we reflect God in managing responsibly the resources He's provided.

- 3. Our relationships.** All humans are designed for relationships (even introverts like me). Of all the things God created, the only thing He deemed “not good” was that man was alone (Gen. 2:18). He needed a complement, someone like him who would be his equal, which led to the creation of the first woman from his side. In our relationships, both marital and platonic, we reflect God's Trinitarian nature, for He exists in eternal community as the Father, Son, and Spirit.

All these characteristics are unique to humanity and are fundamental ways in which we resemble God. And although our sin twists and perverts our ability to reflect God rightly, we still reflect Him. Despite our sin, we are what God says we are—His image bearers—and no one and no thing can take this away from us.

## The Key to Human Flourishing

Understanding humanity's identity as God's image bearers is the key to pursuing human dignity and flourishing. It challenges us to be compassionate toward those with whom we might disagree or who would vilify our beliefs. It means caring for those in need, protecting the unborn, advocating for adoption, standing against eugenics, and celebrating the elderly. It means valuing all others—people from every nation, tongue, and tribe—and seeking to put every last semblance of racism, classism, sexism, or any other -ism to death in our hearts as we pursue the same in our culture. And it means sharing the gospel with our fellow fallen image bearers, introducing them to the One who has the power to redeem and restore them so they can once again reflect their Creator in the world.

God gives us a bigger vision of humanity than we can create for ourselves, a better vision that actually gives life. Let's share this good news with the world.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 1–2

## Doctrines to Explore

- Image of God in Humanity

## Reflect and Discuss

1. How have you understood what it means to be made in the image of God?
2. How does understanding what it means to be an image bearer frame how you see yourself?
3. How does the fact that everyone is made in God's image encourage you to reach others in your community with the gospel?

9.

## The Answer to the Problem of Evil

You know evil exists. No matter what you believe—if you're a Christian, a Buddhist, or a moral relativist<sup>29</sup>—you know evil is real. You know it is present. And you know it is a problem. By “problem,” I don't simply mean the acts of evil going on around us, such as:

- oppressive governments crushing their citizens rather than protecting them;
- millions of unborn children being robbed of their humanity and their lives every year;
- millions of men, women, and children being sold and exploited by human traffickers;
- families being torn apart by adultery and abuse; or
- hypocrites defiling the name of Christ as they protest funerals, churches, and places in the midst of suffering with messages of hate and judgment.

The evil deeds committed every day in this world are a problem. But there is another problem, a deeper one that gnaws at our consciences as we try to make sense of why evil seems to continue unabated.

## The Great Contradiction

For thousands of years, philosophers and theologians, since before

the days of ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 341-270 BC) and beyond the days of C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), have attempted to make sense of this problem, which we might boil down to a conflict between the existence of evil and a good and all-powerful God. We often see the problem as a contradiction, an *either/or* situation that leads us to conclude that only one of these can be true, not both.

Lewis summarized the problem this way: “If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what he wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.”<sup>30</sup>

God’s lacking “either goodness, or power, or both,” however, doesn’t square with what we read in Scripture. And explaining away evil doesn’t square with our experience in the world. Both are true. So it seems we are limited to one of these three options:

- God is willing to prevent evil but is unable to overcome it;
- God is able to prevent evil but is unwilling to do so; or
- God is willing and able to prevent evil but chooses not to.

But could there be another option, one that offers a *both/and* instead of an *either/or*? Could the problem we see be a paradox rather than a contradiction, something that seems to be inconsistent on the surface but when we examine it more deeply, the truth is revealed?

## The Good News About God’s Goodness

In answering the problem of evil, the Bible doesn’t attempt to offer the origins *of* evil. We don’t learn from Scripture exactly how it came to be in the first place. We don’t find the first cause. The Bible doesn’t (as we so often do) put the blame on Satan<sup>31</sup> or on human will.<sup>32</sup> It also doesn’t put the blame on God Himself as the Creator of all things.

Instead, the Bible points us back to the character and nature of God with four truths:

1. **God is good.** God's goodness is the foundation of the entire message of the Bible. It is at the heart of God's purposes in redeeming people from every nation and people group. Throughout Scripture, God is praised for His goodness, and His goodness is the model for human goodness. He is the standard by which we can determine if something is good because He is the one who is truly "good" (Pss. 34:8; 107:1; 119:68; Luke 18:19).
2. **God is the source of good.** God is the only One truly capable of declaring anything "good." He is the One who defines what it means to be good and the One we emulate when we do good (Gen. 1:4; Ex. 20; Ps. 16:2; 3 John 11).
3. **God does good on behalf of His creation.** God is always doing good, both to those who love Him and those who continue to be far from Him. Maybe a simpler way to say it is because God is good, He does good. He sends the sun and rain on everyone. He blesses the faithful. He gives good gifts. He takes what was meant for evil and uses it for good. He shows no favoritism. He judges fairly and honestly. All the time, everywhere—even in the midst of pain and suffering—God is doing good (Gen. 50:20; Pss. 23:6; 68:10; 73:1; 119:65; 145:9; Lam. 3:25; Matt. 5:45; Luke 6:35; Acts 14:17; Rom. 2:4; 8:28; 11:22; Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4).
4. **God gives a good answer to the problem of evil.** The gospel itself is God's answer. In the incarnation, Jesus, God the eternal Son, entered into the world to be our righteousness. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our evil. And as He rose from death, He declared evil's defeat forevermore (1 John 3:8).

These are hard truths to grasp—almost impossible! As Martin Luther said, “It’s very difficult for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can’t grasp this.”<sup>33</sup> Yet this is the answer to the problem of evil. As much as our whys and what-ifs about what we don’t know matter (and they do), what we do know matters more.

We know that God is good. We know God is the source of all that is good. We know He is good to this world and the beings He’s created, showering grace and blessing upon us all. And most importantly, He gives a good answer to the problem of evil by *being* the answer to the problem of evil!

- He answered the problem, defeating evil through Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- He answers the problem, defeating evil as He works in and through His people, the Church.
- He will answer the problem, defeating evil forever when Christ returns and makes all things new.

So while we wait, we lean on His character, trusting that God really does seek the good of all who love Him according to His purposes (Rom. 8:28). We hope, longing for the day when evil will be no more, because we know it really will be so. And we go, sharing the good news our good God has given us with the entire world: In Christ, God has defeated evil. In Christ, He defeats evil. And in Christ, He will defeat evil forevermore.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 50:20; Psalms 16:2; 107:1; 119:68; Matthew 5:45; Luke 18:19; Romans 8:28; 3 John 11

## Doctrines to Explore

- The Problem of Evil

## Reflect and Discuss

1. How have you struggled with the problem of evil?
2. How does the gospel answer the problem of evil?
3. How would you share the good news of Christ's victory over evil with someone who has experienced evil?

10.

## God Is Always at Work

Is God *really* still at work in the world? I'm sure most of us, at one time or another, have asked this question. After all, what we read in the Bible seems so different than what we experience every day. We don't see fire coming down from heaven, and I'm betting none of us have heard a voice speaking through a burning bush. So maybe He called it a day a couple thousand years ago, assuming He was really ever engaged with the world at all.

That was an uncomfortable paragraph to write. For some of you, it might have been an uncomfortable one to read. But most of us have asked this question at one time or another, whether out of curiosity, doubt, or despair. It's not wrong to ask a question like this. It can actually be quite healthy, as long as we want to know the answer.

And make no mistake: There are answers, and God wants us to know what they are. After all, God really does care for this world and the beings made in His image. He is intimately involved with creation on every level. That is central to His very nature.<sup>34</sup> And He has shown that there are two ways He continues to work in the world: miraculously and providentially.

### The Extraordinary and Extraordinarily Ordinary Works of God

If we think about God working in the world at all, we typically think about miracles. This makes sense. After all, it's only natural that a

supernatural being will act in supernatural ways. But what do we mean by *miracle*? Miracles are not merely events that cannot be explained easily. Miracles are *supernatural acts of God intended to glorify Himself*. Miracles offer a glimpse of a world that is “larger, more vivid, more *real*—more submissive to its Creator.”<sup>35</sup> They confirm the truth of God’s message and the trustworthiness of His messengers, as He did with Moses (Ex. 4:5), Peter (Acts 3:6), and, of course, Jesus Himself (Matt. 14:22-33; Mark 8:22-25; Luke 8:23-25; John 6). Miracles give us reason to stop and give God glory (Acts 3:8). So let’s think about two real miracles that we can see right now:

- 1. The existence of human life.** The fact that we exist at all is a miracle, especially if you take the odds offered by the secular scientific community at face value. The odds are so far against it that successfully navigating an asteroid field seems like a cakewalk by comparison.<sup>36</sup> The virtual impossibility of our existence points to Someone greater acting supernaturally and calls on us to respond with awe and praise.
- 2. Eternal life in Christ.** It’s literally a miracle anyone is a Christian. By faith in Christ, the One who miraculously rose from the dead, God does the impossible and raises the spiritually dead to life! Humanity’s mere existence is a miracle, but eternal life in Christ is an even greater miracle.

Where miracles are supernatural acts of God, providence refers to God’s active and ongoing rule over and care for creation. This doctrine seems simple enough to understand in a sentence (maybe). Practically, it’s much trickier than we think for two reasons:

- 1. We take it for granted.** God is always at work for the good of this world and the people in it (Gen. 8:21-22; Matt. 6:25-34; John 5:17; Heb. 1:3). Right now, God is at work making sure everything continues to exist! Think about it:

- Why are the atoms making up your body continuing to hold together?
- Why does the earth continue in its orbit around the sun?
- Why does gravity hold you to the earth's surface?

I don't know about you, but I rarely worry about these things. I assume that gravity will still work tomorrow, that the earth will still be moving, and that my body isn't going to suddenly disintegrate. Chances are, you are the same way. And while we have data that explains how all of these events are taking place, it's the Scriptures that tell us why: because Jesus is holding everything He has made together (Col. 1:17).

2. **It's too big for us!** Providence is simply too big for us. We want things to be simple, and God's sovereignty is anything but. This is why, in our obsession with autonomy, we create problems the Bible doesn't. We act as though affirming God's sovereignty means we must deny our ability to make real, meaningful choices in the world. But the Bible doesn't present us with simplistic either/ors. Instead, it says yes (see Prov. 19:21). In a way we can't fully comprehend, God's plan goes forward through the choices and prayers of human beings. What's mind-boggling for us is that even our sinful choices are factored into God's plan for this world, as in the case of Jesus' crucifixion, which was both purposed by God and carried out by the evil actions of humans (Acts 2:23).

## The Source of Our Extraordinary Hope

Our questions about God's working in the world may be rooted in doubt, but the answer grounds us in an extraordinary hope. God

is working miraculously to glorify Himself, and He is working providentially to glorify Himself. He is actively engaged at every single moment, using His now sinful creatures to ensure that “all things work together for the good of those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). He is moving history toward its intended conclusion: a new creation where we will enjoy His presence forevermore. He is giving new life to people like you and me *through* people like you and me as we share the gospel with those God puts in our path. And because God is at work, we have all the reason in the world for hope. We know what is coming, and we know that nothing can stop it.

If the Lord be with us, we have no cause of fear. His eye is upon us, his arm over us, his ear open to our prayer; his grace sufficient, his promise unchangeable. Under his protection, though the path of duty should lie through fire and water, we may cheerfully and confidently pursue it.<sup>37</sup>

## Study and Meditate

Proverbs 19:21; Matthew 6:25-34; John 5:17; Acts 2:23; Romans 8:28; Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3

## Doctrines to Explore

- God’s Plan and Human Action
- God’s Providence
- Prayer and Providence
- Miracles

## Reflect and Discuss

1. When you think about God's working in the world, which do you tend to focus on: God's miraculous or providential actions? Why?
2. Why is it so easy to take God's providential work for granted?
3. How should God's providence change how we pray?

## 11.

# The Supernatural Beings Next Door

When I hear the word *angel*, I always think of Michael Landon. Remember his show *Highway to Heaven*? The one where he played an angel on probation who had to travel around America to help people in need on behalf of “the Boss” (i.e., God)? It was *Quantum Leap* without time travel. It was *Touched by an Angel* before... Well, actually they’re the same show.

These are the associations my mind makes. Clearly 1980s television ruined me.

Landon’s angelic journeyman wasn’t the first supernatural being in pop culture to headline a TV show, nor would he be the last. Angels and demons alike are pop culture staples, playing heroic and villainous roles in dozens of television shows, films, and book series: sparkly vampires in *Twilight*; vampires with souls and demons just doing their jobs in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; angels and demons of all sorts in *Supernatural*; two road-tripping angels with a message of hope in *Touched by an Angel*; the devil himself owning a nightclub in *Lucifer*; or an angel and a demon who team up to sabotage the end times in *Good Omens*.<sup>38</sup>

What’s funny about all of these depictions of supernatural beings is they’re all generally approachable. Many are even likable. They’re funny, flawed, learning, and growing characters. All of them are controllable. Exactly the kind of supernatural beings we’d all be

inclined to make up. (So in others words, nothing like the real thing.)

In case you had any doubt: angels and demons *are* real. They exist and they are active in this world right now. But what would you do if you actually encountered one?

## Angels Are More Terrifying Than We Think

If all we had to go on was pop culture, we'd think angels were gentle beings who can't wait to give you a hug, a pat on the head, and possibly a bagel with cream cheese.<sup>39</sup> My irreligious family members speak of deceased loved ones becoming angels<sup>40</sup> and guardian angels watching over us, though with no clarity as to why they are watching or who sent them.<sup>41</sup> Again, nothing like the Bible describes. The Scriptures depict these created beings as something other than human, entities created distinctly from us. They're often called "sons of God," "holy ones," "spirits," "principalities," and "powers." They appear as messengers of God (which is the meaning behind the word "angel" in both Hebrew and Greek<sup>42</sup>), acting as His agents throughout history by:

- guarding the gates of the garden (Gen. 3:24);
- giving visions to prophets such as Ezekiel and Daniel;
- telling Zechariah that his son would be the forerunner to the Messiah, the rescuer and redeemer of God's people (Luke 1:5-25);
- announcing to Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38);
- declaring Jesus' resurrection on the third day (Luke 24:1-8); and
- showing John a vision of the final days and the glorious return of Christ (Rev. 22:8-9).

Angelic beings exist to bring God glory and to carry out His plans and purposes. Though they often remain hidden, their existence reminds us that we live in a supernatural world. But what would you do if one actually revealed itself to you right now? You would probably fall down in sheer terror, and be tempted to worship it.

How do I know this? Because this is what people often did in the Bible (see Luke 1:13,30; 2:9-10; Rev. 22:8). If an angel came up to you right now, you wouldn't give it a hug; you would cower in fear. They are not cute, cuddly, and pudgy kids with wings. They are not our loved ones in a new form. They are something other. And they are far more terrifying than we think (see Ezek. 10; Rev. 4:6-8).

## Dangerous, Deadly, but Defeated

It's not just angels we have a hard time with. We struggle to put demons in the right perspective too. We know they are otherworldly beings of great power, but often we fail to recognize them for what they are.

Remember my irreligious family? They don't just talk about guardian angels and angelic transformation. More than one has claimed to see a ghost, and at least one said she's spoken with the dead, among all the other things that'll give you the heebie jeebies.<sup>43</sup> And you know something? I believe them. I am certain they're having these kinds of encounters. But I don't believe it's the souls of human beings they're encountering. God hasn't made the world to work that way.<sup>44</sup>

But I do believe they're encountering demons.

Demons, like their angelic counterparts, are among us and active in this world as well. In fact, they are of the same nature as angels. Chief among them is Satan, who leads the rebellion against God and tempted the first humans to sin (Gen. 3; Rev. 12). Like all demons, his desire is to "steal and kill and destroy" as he works in opposition

to God's plans and purposes in this world (John 10:10; see also Job 1:6; Zech. 3:1; Luke 10:18). And were he able, he would surely do it.

Years ago, I heard a so-called revivalist speak about his encounters with demon-possessed people. Inevitably, his stories would end with him physically assaulting the individual, punching or kicking the demons out of their victims. These kinds of stories make me sick because:

- They're consistently told by charlatans who are fleecing naïve people;<sup>45</sup> and
- If these people had ever actually encountered a demon, they would be too busy trembling to do any punching or kicking.

Satan is a roaring lion, but he is ultimately a caged one. He is dangerous and deadly, but he and his followers have been and will be defeated. Their fate is sealed. They know what awaits them: the lake of fire, which was first created for them (Matt. 25:41). In the meantime, they still wield great influence in this world. They still have the ability to wreak great havoc. They are opposed to losing any from their influence. And they are not to be trifled with.

## Heralds of a Greater Message

As Christians, we are heralds of a greater message than our ideas about angels and demons and the supernatural can ever hope to be. We have been entrusted with a message of good news for humanity, a message of redemption and reconciliation that angels long to catch a glimpse of (1 Pet. 1:12). It's a message that is better than going about trying to learn valuable life lessons or right things that once went wrong. It's a message that transfers us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. That is the gospel message, the message of Jesus, the One "who demons fear, of whom angels sing."<sup>46</sup>

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 3; Job 1:6; Matthew 25:41; Luke 1; 10:18; 24:1-8; John 10:10; Revelation 22:8-9

## Doctrines to Explore

- Angels
- Demons

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Why do you think supernatural beings like angels and demons are so prevalent in popular culture? What makes them intriguing to us?
2. How does a biblical view of supernatural beings challenge what we see in popular culture?
3. Why is Jesus greater than any angel or demon? How can we share this with our friends and family members?



*“...just as sin entered the world through one man,  
and death through sin, in this way death spread  
to all people, because all sinned.”*

—Romans 5:12

12.

## Sinners at War with a Loving God

“You’ve got to read this book. Have you read it?” My niece, then 17, told me as she held up a copy of a book I had hoped she would never read: *50 Shades of Grey*. At that moment, I only had two thoughts:

1. Did my benefits cover the amount of therapy I was going to need?
2. How could I snatch the book out of her hands and set it on fire as discreetly as possible?

My actual reaction was to stop myself from screaming at the sky with white-hot Shatner-esque rage,<sup>47</sup> take a deep breath, and say, “Ummm, no, I haven’t. What do you like about this book?”

“It’s just so romantic.”

“KAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHNNNNN!”<sup>48</sup>

Yes, we really do live in a world where *Fifty Shades of Grey* legitimately counts as being romantic, as opposed to creepy and pornographic.<sup>49</sup> And this is a symptom of a larger sickness with a spiritual starting point. A sickness called sin.

### A Multipurpose Word for All Kinds of Evil

Sin is a strange word to use in Western culture, largely because we don’t really know what it means. It is not going against the grain of

cultural standards (an act of cultural heresy, which we'll get to later), nor is it making a poor decision.<sup>50</sup> Nor is it even the temptation to defy God and His commands (Matt. 4). It is a deliberate and multifaceted act defined by:

- **Missing the mark.** Sin is falling short of God's glory and His standards for humanity by our conscious choice to defy Him (Rom. 3:23).
- **Transgression.** It is lawbreaking, or transgression, a deliberate act of defiance of God's explicit commands (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim. 2:14).
- **Rebellion.** Speaking to the heart of our transgressions, the rebellious nature of sin is our desire to disobey God, shaking our clenched fists at the One who has made us and shown us the way to life (Isa. 1:2).
- **Selfishness.** Sin is acting out of a selfish attitude, one that assumes happiness comes from doing whatever we think we want rather than obedience to God. It is putting ourselves first rather than others (Phil. 2:3).
- **Idolatry.** Our sin is the real-world manifestation of what rules our hearts, our worship of someone or something other than God, whether statues of wood or gold, status, security, power, or pleasure (Matt. 15:10-20; Jas. 4:1-10).

Do you see how all of these facets of sin play together? When we sin, we are always acting in rebellion and selfishness. We're transgressing God's commands and falling short of His glory. We do it all because we are, in that moment or in the scope of our lives, worshiping someone or something other than the Creator (Rom. 1:18-25). We think sin will make us happy, and this world tells us this is true. While in the moment sin may give us what we want, it's never enough. Our desire intensifies with every hit, each one less satisfying than the one before

it. And in the end, all we're left with is guilt, shame, and ultimately death (Gen. 2:17).

We are sin addicts, reveling in self-destruction, and it's killing us.

## Taking Sin as Seriously as God Does

There is no exception to this reality. All of us are without excuse. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). And if we truly want lost people to see Christ as their only hope and to see the lies of a world opposed to God for what they are, we need to embrace the Bible's shocking portrayal of the state of humanity. Here's what that requires of us:

**Honesty about our own sin.** When it comes to our own sinfulness, we are the Black Knight shouting, "It's just a flesh wound," and trying to wage war despite our arms and legs being hacked off.<sup>51</sup> As Christians, it's tempting to behave as though our sin is somehow less offensive to God than the sins of those who do not believe or even those of other believers, at least the ones we think we are better than. Instead, the gospel encourages us to see our own sins as the most offensive to God and ourselves as "the worst of them" (1 Tim. 1:15-16). There is no room for posturing or self-righteousness in the Christian life because the whole point of Christianity is you haven't got any of that anyway!

**Correcting the world's lies.** We don't condemn those who don't believe, for they are already condemned by their sin (John 3:18). But we do still need to correct the world's lies. We need to be honest about the consequences of sin, that all it offers is the certainty of death. To be honest enough to say sin really is as bad as God says it is.

**Sharing the story of the One who overcame sin.** The gospel really is good news for the whole world, and it is even better when we realize just how much Jesus overcame to rescue us. Defeating sin, taking on Himself the penalty our sin was due, cost Jesus more than we can

ever imagine, but He did it because of the joy set before Him, the joy of seeing His people perfected and this world redeemed forevermore (Heb. 12:2).

We need to take sin seriously because God takes it seriously. And when we take it as seriously as God does, the gospel becomes more beautiful because there is hope for all who will call on Jesus for salvation. Sin doesn't have the final word. Jesus does. And He is and will be victorious.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 3; Isaiah 1:2; Matthew 4–7; 15:10-20; John 14:30; Romans 1–6; Ephesians 2; 1 Timothy 1:15-16; James 2:10; 4:1-12; 1 John 5:4-5; Hebrews 12:1-2

## Doctrines to Explore

- Sin as Missing the Mark
- Sin as Transgression
- Sin as Rebellion
- Sin as Selfishness
- Sin as Idolatry
- Sin and Death
- Temptation and Sin
- Guilt and Shame
- The World Opposed to God

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What is your understanding of sin? How might it have changed over time?
2. Why is it important to understand the heart issues behind sin rather than just focusing on actions?
3. How does understanding your own sin help you see the gospel as more beautiful?

13.

## We Are Not as Free as We Were Meant to Be

Outside of politics, church polity, and possibly methods of baptism, I'm not sure anything gets Christians riled up quite as much as two words: free will. Does it really exist? Does it contradict God's sovereignty? And just how free is "free" anyway?

I'm not interested in jumping into a debate that has been raging for the last 1900 years or so. And as much as I'd like to break out my trusty flannelgraph and give it a shot, there's no point. The Bible doesn't try to explain the relationship between humanity's ability to make meaningful choices and God's sovereignty over literally everything you can think of (and likely beyond that too). It simply presents both as being equally true and equally valid simultaneously. The Bible offers no explanation of how they work together because friends need not be reconciled.<sup>52</sup> But the Bible does describe one truth related to this debate in shocking detail. And it's a truth that makes me a little uneasy because it tells us why the Bible doesn't try to answer the freedom question. Freedom of the sort described above isn't the point. None of us are really free, at least not in the way we were *meant* to be.

### The Choice That Doomed Us All

When God created the first humans, Adam and Eve, they were created good. *Very* good, in fact. They had unhindered access to God. They stood in His presence. They walked with Him in the garden. They

were His representatives in creation. They were free—*truly* free in a way that we can't imagine because we aren't. They could choose to obey God, to honor Him, to love Him. And of course, they could choose not to. So what happened? They chose not to; they rebelled against their Creator by disobeying the single prohibition God had given them—not to eat of the fruit of one very specific tree. “The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom” (Gen. 3:6). She reached out, took the fruit, ate it, and gave it to her husband, who ate it too. Why? Because they both *wanted* to.

They made a choice, and their choice doomed us all. (Thanks, guys.)

## We Love Nothing Like We Love What's Wrong

The story of humanity changed radically in that moment. No longer were humans “very good” by nature. Instead, our nature was twisted and distorted by Adam's sin, and we were condemned in it (Rom. 5:12). Humanity fell into a bottomless pit of ever-increasing evil that culminated in a massive, worldwide flood, causing the death of every single human being on the planet, minus eight. But even then, that wasn't enough because right after that we read, “The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth onward” (Gen. 8:21). What was true before the flood was true after the flood as well. And it continues on through today. This is the default mode of the human heart (and if you have any doubt about that, just look at Twitter for a minute). When presented with the choice to sin or not to sin, we'll *always* choose to sin. It's our bent, our inclination. We are enslaved to it (Rom. 6:17).

I know using a word like “enslaved” is dangerous. After all, if we're slaves, then we don't really have a say in the matter, do we? *We can't help it; it's the way God made us.* But here's where things get really

twisted: we don't sin just because we don't have a choice not to sin; we sin because we love sin. That's what Jesus says outright in John 3: "People *loved* darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19, emphasis mine). So we sin and we keep on sinning because ultimately it's what we love to do most of all. We don't want to do what's right because we love nothing else like we love what's wrong in God's sight.

This is the ugly truth the Bible reveals. We are not free the way we think we are. We are enslaved to sin. We love that which enslaves us.

## Where True Freedom Reigns

When we are confronted by this reality, it's tempting to fall into despair. It would take a miracle to solve this kind of problem, wouldn't it? Which is exactly what God does.

Through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, God does something incredible: He creates in us "clean" hearts (Ps. 51:10). Hearts cleansed from the stain of sin and capable of loving light rather than darkness. Hearts that are, through the Holy Spirit's power, capable of choosing to do what God commands because He is what we love most of all. In Christ, we find the freedom Adam desired that led to his disobedience. In Christ, we find the freedom we desperately need.

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 3–11; Romans 5–8; John 3

## Doctrines to Explore

- Enslaved to Sin

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What is your first reaction to this understanding of the human heart? Why?
2. Think about the issues you've seen in your family or community. How does this understanding of the human condition change how you might respond?
3. In what ways have you seen the Holy Spirit empower you to turn away from sin? Take a moment to consider those and give thanks to Him today.

14.

## The Mess We Made of Everything

I'm tempted to quit social media every time there's a natural disaster. This isn't because I'm hardhearted (I hope). It's that I know the theological equivalent of a rap battle is going to happen.

For those unfamiliar, the rap battle is an intricate game of one-upmanship where one MC will challenge the lyrical prowess and credibility of another. In Christian social media, it's usually a series of think pieces about the purpose of natural disasters, of which there are typically two kinds:

1. The declaration of a natural disaster as an act of divine judgment because of one persistent form of sin or another.
2. Why the people declaring said disaster as an act of divine judgment are heartless and cruel.

These theological rap battles are *exhausting*, and not just because they are usually poorly written (though they often are). They're exhausting because they too often offer simplistic and unhelpful answers to very complex situations.

## All the World Is Mad

When we look at what happens in the world, it's tempting to look at natural disasters and read them in light of Genesis 6–9, Judges, or 1–2 Kings, where God did indeed use such events as acts of punitive

judgment against His rebellious image bearers and the idolatrous kings of Israel and Judah.<sup>53</sup> If we read only those passages, that might be the logical conclusion. But the Scriptures paint a much more complex picture.

When God created the world, everything was as it was supposed to be. It was perfect and good and holy and wonderful. The first humans (briefly) lived in harmony with our environment as its stewards and cultivators. Work was joyful, the temperature was always just right, and they had all they needed to eat and drink. Even our relationships with one another were characterized by love and cooperation. It truly was paradise.

This is not the world we live in, clearly, because Adam and Eve messed everything up when they disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So God said to them:

The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. (Gen. 3:17-18)

The first humans' transgression—their sinful act of rebellion and idolatry—threw the entire equilibrium of creation out of whack, with futility and frustration being its new default position. And the evidence is all around us:

- The light of the sun puts us at risk of cancer.
- The water turns chaotic and deadly whenever a storm begins.
- Earthquakes level homes and (occasionally) move entire nations.
- Droughts scorch our crops and make it difficult to grow food.
- Wildfires consume everything in their path.

Worse still, it wasn't just the physical world that was cursed, so too were human relationships, which are now characterized by conflict

instead of cooperation (Gen. 3:16). We are engaged in an unceasing rap battle, desperately and futilely trying to one-up one another to win the title of biggest sinner.<sup>54</sup> We fight and defy one another. Authority corrupts. Power seduces. Pride destroys.

Our first parents were given paradise, and they ruined the whole thing. Human sin cursed the world, and now all the world is mad. (Again, thanks, guys.)

## Groaning for Redemption

Human sin is responsible for the madness of the world, in every sense. But it doesn't fully explain why the world responds the way it does. Think about it this way: Sin is a foreign element, a virus. It doesn't belong in the world that God created. When we're sick, our bodies immediately respond to the presence of the intruder, attacking the virus with everything our immune systems can throw at it.

The world responds in a similar way. The world is groaning, longing for redemption and deliverance from its bondage to sin (Rom. 8:20-22). In the same way we all long for the return of Christ so that we will finally be with Him and free from the effects of sin, creation as a whole longs for His return. When Jesus finally does return, He will put an end to its suffering. It will groan no more because the curse will be no more. Jesus will make all things new.

This is what God wants us to remember every time the world seems to be falling apart. When a hurricane ravages a coastal city. When a tornado rips through a small town. When droughts cause meager crops to wither and die. When earthquakes level buildings and tsunamis move islands. These things are not to give us fodder for theological rap battles or self-righteous posturing. All of these are to remind us of the world's need for Christ—a world broken by all human sin—driving us to pray fervently for His return and to show His love and compassion to those in need.

# Study and Meditate

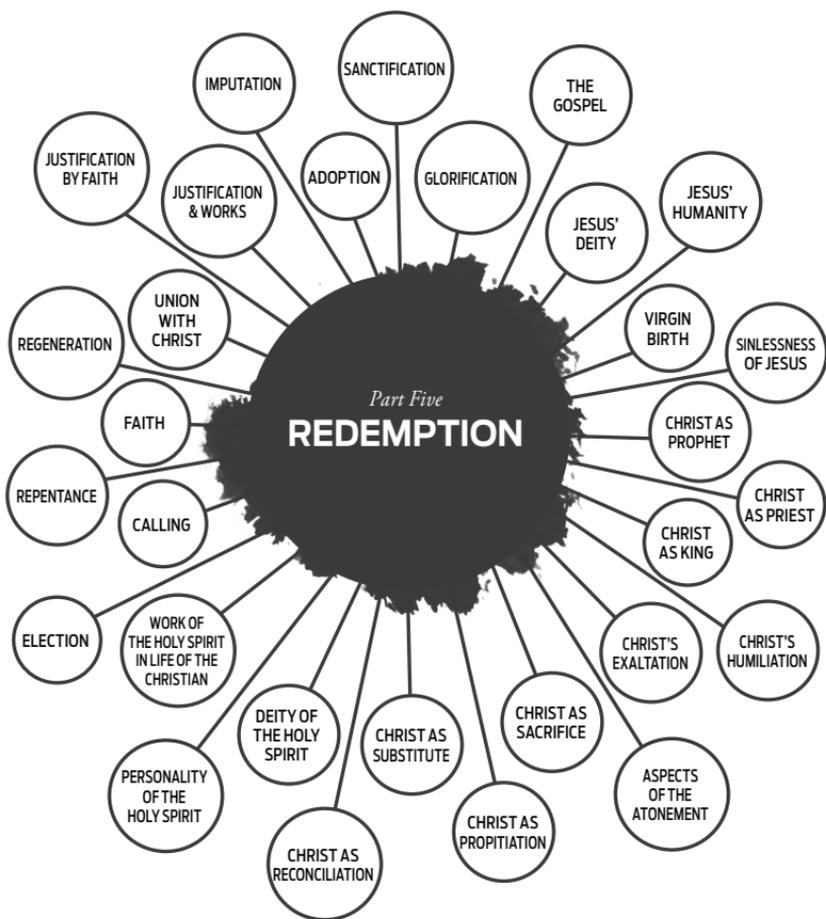
Genesis 3; Romans 8:20-22

## Doctrines to Explore

- Sin's Effects in the World

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What are a few ways you've seen sin's effects in the world?
2. How can the gospel give you hope when the world seems to be falling apart?
3. How can you share this hope with someone you know?



*“For the grace of God has appeared,  
bringing salvation for all people...”*

*—Titus 2:11*

15.

## What Is the Gospel?

If I could sit down for an hour with anyone, one person I would choose would be the late Christopher Hitchens. Everything I read about him, and much of what I've read *by* him, is fascinating to me, even though I disagree with almost all of his views. He was a passionate proponent of atheism and openly skeptical of the Christian faith in particular. But as skeptical and as strong a voice for the cause of unbelief as he was, what I've found is that he was a greater advocate of rationality—especially among the religious.

In December 2009, Hitchens was interviewed by Marilyn Sewell for *Portland Monthly*. Sewell, a Unitarian minister and self-described liberal Christian,<sup>55</sup> recognized his tendency to cite what she calls fundamentalist sources in his books. As one who doesn't take the stories of Scripture literally and doesn't believe in the doctrine of atonement (keep reading, we'll get there), she wanted to know if he made a distinction between “fundamentalist faith and liberal religion.” His response was breathtaking:

I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.<sup>56</sup>

Cue the altar call, y'all.

## The Event That Changed the World

What is so powerful about Hitchens' statement is that for a man who was so wrong on so many things, in this he was right. He knew exactly what the gospel was, even if he didn't believe it. Jesus of Nazareth, the One called the Christ, the Messiah, died for our sins and rose from the dead. That is, without qualification, the gospel (1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 5:21). But let's dig a little deeper.

The gospel is a real event in human history that completely changed the world. God the Son, the One through whom and for whom and by whom everything exists, entered into His creation. He entered into the world and became like *us*. Tempted to sin as we are, but never succumbing to temptation. Growing, learning, experiencing everything a human does to the fullest—but doing it all perfectly, without fail, to the glory of His Father. Unjustly arrested, tried, and sentenced to the worst sort of death—crucifixion, a death reserved for the worst of criminals. And on that cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied, as the song says.<sup>57</sup> He was wrapped in linen, placed in a tomb, and everyone believed that was the end. And it was. Until it wasn't. Because on the third day, Jesus rose again as He promised He would. He defeated sin and death and made a way for all who put their trust in His atonement to be forgiven, reconciled, and welcomed into God's family as His beloved children.

This is the gospel. This is what Christians have believed and shared for two thousand years. Any gospel that doesn't include this isn't the gospel. Without this event, there could be no salvation. There could be no forgiveness of sins. No reconciliation with the Father. We would be trapped forever, vacillating between thumbing our noses at God and trying in vain to earn His approval.

But there's more to the story.

## The Story God's Been Telling from the Beginning

I used that word *story* very intentionally. The Bible is emphatic that the gospel event is the heart of the gospel message. It is what we must believe to be saved. But the Bible doesn't *just* explore the gospel as this one event but as a story, one God has been telling since “before the foundations of the earth” (Eph. 1:4). It's the story that runs through all of Scripture from beginning to end, from creation to new creation. While the gospel *event* is the climax of the gospel *story*, every day between Jesus' resurrection and His return brings us closer to the story's *conclusion*—a restored and redeemed creation with God dwelling in the midst of it. A new heaven and new earth where sin, death, suffering, guilt, shame, poverty, greed, racism, abuse, and every other ill that plagues us will be no more, and God's people will live with Him forever (Isa. 25:8; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21).

## Reveling in the Glory of God

Remember how God is both transcendent and immanent—how He is both far above and beyond His creation yet intimately involved with it? (If not, go back and re-read chapter 4.) The gospel story and gospel event parallel these two aspects of His nature:

- **The gospel event demonstrates God's immanence.** It tells us how deeply personal God's love is for each one of us. God entered into His creation. He lived among us. He lived as one of us. He died and rose again for us.
- **The gospel story demonstrates God's transcendence.** It reminds us of the immensity of God's love for the entirety of creation. It is a sweeping saga, the grandest of stories, where all things will be made new.

Both the gospel event and the gospel story inspire us to live with devotion and on mission, to revel in God's glory. We give thanks for the good news of what God has done for us in the gospel event. We find our hope in the promise given to us in the gospel story. We obey God's commands out of gratitude for what has been done and what is still to come. And we go forth into the world to share this good news with everyone.

## Study and Meditate

Romans; 1 Corinthians 15; Galatians 3; Ephesians 2; Hebrews

## Doctrines to Explore

- The Gospel

## Reflect and Discuss

1. How does the gospel event give you joy today?
2. How does the gospel story give you hope today?
3. How can you share this good news with someone today?

16.

## The Strangest Thing Christians Believe

Let's just be honest: the Christian faith is weird. We believe some strange stuff, guys. Think about it: Christians believe there is a perfectly good and holy God who is One but also Three, who created everything, has revealed Himself to us in written form, controls everything but also gives us the ability to act out of our own will, and has been working out a plan throughout all of history to rescue the world from the mess our choices have made. And that's only a bit of what we covered in the first half of this book! But there's one belief that is especially unique—one that has been at the center of just about every controversy about Jesus over the last two thousand years: who—or rather, *what*—He is.

### What's So Strange About...Oh

When I was growing up, I didn't have any clue who or what Jesus really was. I had assumptions but no definite opinions: Maybe He was a real person; maybe He wasn't. Maybe He was an earnest man, a good teacher; maybe He was insane. Then I read the Bible for the first time, and my understanding of Jesus was flipped upside down. Here's what I learned:

1. **Jesus is a human being.** This probably doesn't seem like an earth-shattering revelation or the weirdest thing, but it is a pretty big deal. Jesus isn't some kind of human-shaped,

dispassionate specter. The promised Messiah of God's people is a real, flesh-and-blood person, just as the prophets said He would be (Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:3). Jesus was born, grew, slept, and learned. He was hungry and thirsty. He experienced sorrow, pain, and even temptation. Even now, He understands the human condition because He is one of us (Matt. 4:2; 8:24; John 11:35; 19:28; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22).

- 2. Jesus is more than a human being.** Jesus is a human being, but He is more than that: He is divine. He isn't divine like a demigod, such as the mythical Hercules, Orpheus, Achilles, or Maui. He isn't a small "g" god either. He *is* God, the Word who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1-18). He does what only God can do (Mark 2:5-12; John 10:28; 17:2). He possesses attributes that belong to God alone (Mic. 5:2; John 1:4). Jesus, the Son of God, is equal in every way with God the Father (Matt. 26:63-64; John 1:1-18; 8:58; 10:30; 17:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3).

In other words, the Bible doesn't teach that Jesus is just a human being, and it doesn't teach that He is only a divine being. The Scriptures teach that He is both fully human and fully divine—one person with two natures, who came into the world in the only way that makes sense for such a being to: miraculously *and* naturally.<sup>58</sup>

## How the Impossible Happened

There was a young woman, perhaps just a teenager, named Mary who was visited by an angel. This angel told her that an ancient prophecy was about to be fulfilled—she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, and her child would be the rescuer of God's people (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). Although confused and undoubtedly frightened—after all, to be pregnant and unmarried in her culture

could mean being ostracized from her entire community, or worse—she trusted that God’s will would be done.

Nine months later, she gave birth to a child with no human father. She named Him Jesus, and He grew in wisdom and favor with God and with His people (Luke 2:52). A child who was not merely a child but was God the Son who humbled Himself by taking on human flesh (Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:6-7). The glorious One left His glorious state to become like us so that He might rescue us, eventually experiencing the greatest humiliation of all: death on a cross, becoming “sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). His humiliation would be turned to exaltation by His resurrection from the dead in defeat of sin and death, followed by His return to His glorious state at the right hand of His Father.

By human understanding, all of this is impossible. But this is how the impossible happened.

## **Do Not Be Ashamed of the Strangest— and Greatest—Things**

This is what I’m talking about when I say the Christian faith is weird. How two natures can exist in one person doesn’t seem possible to natural thinking. For a baby to be conceived without two people being involved in some capacity seems ridiculous. Certainly, it didn’t make sense to me before I believed it!

It’s easier to think that Jesus’ deity was a bit of mythologizing, to believe the whole story was borrowed from pagan religions, to declare the story of the virgin birth was an elaborate cover-up and that Mary was assaulted or unfaithful, to deny that Jesus was both God and man.

But easier doesn’t mean honest. And that’s what the world needs from us: honesty. Our faith is strange to those who do not believe. It is hard

to understand. It is frustrating in so many ways. But the strangest thing we believe is good news for all who would believe. The Jesus we believe in is God. The Jesus we believe in is a man. And the Jesus we believe in is the only One who can rescue any of us.

## Study and Meditate

Isaiah 7; Matthew 1; Luke 1

## Doctrines to Explore

- Jesus' Deity
- Jesus' Humanity
- Virgin Birth
- Sinlessness of Jesus
- Christ's Humiliation
- Christ's Exaltation

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What Christian belief have you heard and thought was strange? Why?
2. Why is the virgin birth so hard to believe?
3. What do we lose if we set aside the story of Jesus' birth?

17.

## The One Mediator Who Will Never Fail

My daughter burst into my bedroom. It was barely 7:00 that Saturday morning. Offense radiating from every pore, she began telling me how her brother had done something mean, hurt her feelings, and that she was never *ever* going to play with him again. I called my son into the room, and a few minutes later he entered, bouncy as can be. I told him what I had heard happened and wanted to know his side of the story. Eventually he gave it, apologies were halfheartedly uttered, and then they went back to playing. Until the next fight broke out.

As a dad, I have one job. Okay, I have many of those. But at 7:00 a.m. on a Saturday, I have one job: defuse the situation as quickly as possible so my wife can sleep in. More accurately, I am the mediator between my youngest children.

Broadly speaking, mediators exist to create, enhance, and restore relationships. That might involve conflict resolution or negotiations, such as when a mediator acts as a representative or go-between. But it might also be the role technology—especially social media—plays in our lives, as we build (limited) relationships with people who live hundreds or thousands of miles away from us. Technically, even the book you're reading right now is acting as a mediator between you and me, transmitting this message on my behalf.

In every relationship we have, in every area of our lives, mediators are present. And that includes between us and God.

## The Mediators to Prepare Us

We were created in and for relationship with God, as His image bearers. We were created to enjoy His presence and represent Him throughout creation. But human sin, our rebellion against God's good commands, damaged that relationship. "Damaged" is putting it lightly; our sin has separated us relationally from our Creator, cutting us off from Him (Isa. 59:2). Left to our own devices, the relationship we were created for is impossible. So God established three offices to aide His people: prophets, priests, and kings.

- He sent *prophets* like Elijah and Isaiah to speak to His people on His behalf.
- He called *priests* like Aaron and the Levites to represent His people in His presence.
- He raised up *kings* like David and Solomon to govern His people as His representative.

These were all mediators, standing in the gap between God and humanity, teaching God's word to His people, interceding on their behalf before Him, and leading them to obey His commands.

## The Mediator All Other Mediators Needed

But there was a problem with these mediators, even the best of them: none of them were perfect. They were sinners. Even Moses, the greatest mediator of the Old Testament, couldn't escape his sinful nature. He spoke with God as people speak with their friends (Ex. 33:11). He carried the Ten Commandments down from the mountain (Ex. 34:29). He gave God's people the law (Deut. 4:44). People could not even look at him after he was in the presence of God because his face shone with God's glory (Ex. 34:29-35). He led God's people in

the wilderness. He spoke God's word to them. He represented them before God. Yet he still fell short of God's commands. He still failed to obey in all things. And he wasn't alone. Every prophet, every priest, and every king needed a mediator too. The best of human mediators were only shadows of another mediator, One who would be greater than them all. A mediator Moses himself promised would come after him (Deut. 18:15). A mediator:

- Who would not simply give the law but fulfill it;
- Who would demonstrate the Father's holiness with every thought, word, and deed;
- Who would obey God fully and give His righteousness to us;
- Who would humble Himself to the point of death, not simply offering sacrifices for us but becoming the sacrifice;
- Who would redeem and restore His people and His creation, forever removing the stain of sin.

They needed Jesus, the one, true Mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). The true Prophet who is the ultimate revelation of God (Heb. 1:1-3). The Great High Priest who gives us His righteousness and intercedes on our behalf even now (Heb. 7:25; 9:24). The King who made this world, holds all things together, and who is coming soon for His bride, the church (Col. 1:13-20).

## The Mediator We Can Count On

Jesus isn't just the mediator they needed. He is the mediator *we* need. He is better than any prophet, priest, or king. His sacrifice is complete. His teaching is always perfect. His rule is always just. In every way you can imagine, Jesus is better. So what does this really mean for us?

**First, we can be honest about our sins.** We don't have to hide our sins and struggles because Jesus experienced the same struggles we do.

He is “one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). So we can be honest. We can confess our sins. We can admit our struggles and our failings. We don’t have to pretend with Jesus because He knows.

**Second, we can be confident that grace is available to us when we sin.** As we come before Jesus, we can “approach the throne of grace with boldness” (Heb. 4:16). We can come before Him confidently. We can confess our sin without fear of rejection. Jesus is always interceding for us before the Father (Rom. 8:34). Through faith, grace and mercy are ours, and God is faithful and just to forgive our sins when we confess them (1 John 1:9).

**Finally, we have good news worth sharing.** Because Jesus is the perfect mediator, the One who really meant it when He said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), we have good news to share—the best news! He reconciles us to our Creator. He restores and heals the relationship that our sin fractured. He gives us the promise of eternal life. And He invites all of us to be a part of spreading this good news to the ends of the earth.

## Study and Meditate

John 1:1; 6:68; 17; Luke 22:31-32; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 1–4

## Doctrines to Explore

- Christ as Prophet
- Christ as Priest
- Christ as King

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What does a mediator do?
2. Why is Jesus a better mediator?
3. How can you be a part of introducing others to our Great High Priest?

18.

## The Strange Beauty of Death

What could possibly be beautiful about death? It's ugly, dark, and unnatural. When people die, something in us cries out, "This is wrong; this shouldn't be!" When friends and loved ones are diagnosed with cancer, we're quick to express our emotions using some colorful metaphors, usually on our Facebook pages. When people we don't even like die, we recast our relationships, making them kinder than they perhaps were, lest we speak ill of the dead. When friends (and strangers) are dealing with the death of a loved one, we offer well-meaning platitudes, assuring them that the departed are in a better place (even when that might not be the case). Even when celebrities die, we find ourselves mourning for individuals we likely have never met and with whom we have only the thinnest of connections, through an experience of their talents.

We try to avoid thinking about death. We try to avoid death. We *hate* death, even as it shapes so much of our experience of life. And we should hate it. Death was never meant to be. It is a constant reminder of our fallenness. But there's something strangely beautiful about death. Well, one death, anyway.

The death of Jesus.

## Sacrifices and Substitutes

At the heart of Jesus' death on the cross is this concept of atonement, which means, basically, to reconcile sinners like you and me to God. I stress the need for reconciliation because, if you're anything like me, it's easy to minimize the awfulness of sin, but it separates us from God and condemns us under His wrath.

For the longest time, reconciliation with God involved sacrifices and substitutes, specifically in the elaborate sacrificial system of the Israelites. Sacrifices were required for offerings of peace and thanksgiving and for the sins of the people (Lev. 4). Each time the people came to worship, their praise was marked by the death of a substitute—animals such as goats, lambs, and bulls free from any visible imperfection. These sacrifices were offered in conjunction with the people's festivals but also in response to ongoing infractions of God's law.

Central to this system were the sacrifices for the Passover and the Day of Atonement. In the sacrifice for the Passover, God's people were called to remember the final plague sent upon Egypt, during which God spared the firstborn males of every family who painted their doorposts with the blood of a spotless lamb (Ex. 12:1-32,43-51). During the Day of Atonement, two goats were used: one was sacrificed in the place of the people, and the other was released into the wilderness, metaphorically carrying away the sins of the people (Lev. 16).

## Shadows and Substance

But the New Testament reveals that these sacrifices—these substitutes—were only a shadow of something greater to come. They had to be performed over and over again, without fail, by priests who had their own sin requiring forgiveness. The priests would stand at

their service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (Heb. 10:11). The sacrificial system was a shadow of something better. It pointed forward to a perfect sacrifice to come, one performed by Jesus:

Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified. (Heb. 10:11-14)

In His life and death, Jesus was the substitute we all need. During His life and ministry, Jesus obeyed every point of God's law. Not even Moses, the great prophet of Israel who spoke with God face to face (Ex. 33:11), could make this claim. Jesus' record before God was spotless, perfect in every way. In His death on the cross, Jesus was the substitute sacrificed for sin, providing forgiveness for the sin and disobedience of whoever believes in Him (John 3:16; Rom. 3:26), taking away God's wrath and forever making peace between God and His people. In Jesus, the sacrifice that every other sacrifice foreshadowed was made. And nevermore would another sacrifice need to be made, as shadows gave way to substance.

## God's Great Love on Display

God's love is displayed so powerfully in these truths. His provision of a perfect substitute is good news of great joy! No longer do we fear judgment. No longer does guilt hang over us. No longer do we face the wrath of God. But there's something about this that some find uncomfortable; that Jesus would have to die at all strikes some as bizarre. In fact, the prophet Isaiah said, "The LORD was pleased to crush him severely" (Isa. 53:10), which seems positively outrageous

if not outright blasphemous (despite it being a true and biblical statement).

Wasn't Jesus just demonstrating His love for us on the cross? After all, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Sure, He suffered for us, but maybe He did so to show God's hatred toward sin, not to act as a substitute for sinners? Or maybe Jesus died to release us from Satan's kingdom, not to appease the wrath of God. Or maybe God has no wrath to be satisfied by the death of Jesus, and it certainly didn't please God to crush Him. After all, God is love, right? Wouldn't that make Him a cruel, even evil being? Or, well, you get the idea.

Read any number of books and blogs, and you'll see almost every writer wrestling with this tension: *How or why* does the death of Jesus please God? This is a good question because it is key to the whole concept of the atonement. And all of the different theories that exist are an attempt to manage this tension. Some of them are actually good theories. Even better, a number of them are true, though only in part.

At the risk of being too simplistic, maybe think of it like a bicycle wheel. Each spoke in the wheel represents one facet of the atonement: a demonstration of God's love, the demonstration of God's hatred of sin, victory over sin and death, and so forth. But a tire is not spokes alone. There is an outer rim and a hub. The outer rim is Christ's death as a sacrificial substitute. It is through Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice that victory over death is achieved. It is through this atoning sacrifice that we are freed from the kingdom of darkness and God's wrath is averted. It is through this atoning sacrifice that God's love is perfectly demonstrated, for "love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). We don't have our wheel without this outer rim.

But there's something else—the hub. The hub is a small part of the tire, but it holds everything together. Without the hub, the wheel is useless. And for the atonement to hold together, it needs its “hub”: Jesus' choice.

Jesus made it clear: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own” (John 10:18). He was not forced by anyone to go to the cross, least of all His Father. Jesus went willingly, taking on human form, living a perfect, sinless life, and dying the most brutal and horrific of deaths. And more than His choice, He was driven by *joy* to do so: “For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). And the Father loved Him for doing it. Look again at John 10:18, this time with a little more context:

This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. (John 10:17-18)

This is what helps us make sense of the question so many of us struggle with. This is what helps us see Jesus' atoning sacrifice as the good news that it is. The Father loves the Son because the Son willingly gave up His life for His people. That is good news. That is the strange beauty of Jesus' death.

## Study and Meditate

Isaiah 52:13–53:12; John 10:17-18; Romans 3–8; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Hebrews; 1 John 4:10

## Doctrines to Explore

- Aspects of the Atonement
- Christ as Sacrifice
- Christ as Propitiation
- Christ as Substitute
- Christ as Reconciliation

## Discuss and Reflect

1. What is the most difficult thing for you to grasp about the concept of atonement?
2. Think about the analogy of the wheel. What would we lose if we rejected Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice? What do we gain through embracing it?
3. How might refocusing on Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice deepen your prayer life, your worship, and your witness in the world?

19.

## The God Who Is Always with Us

I spent most of my first couple of years as a Christian very confused about the Holy Spirit. At the time, I was part of a church where the leaders were very concerned that we experience what was loosely described as “all God has for us.” To most people in the church, this was code for speaking in tongues, which I hadn’t done.<sup>59</sup> I also hadn’t prophesied, laid hands on someone and seen them healed, or experienced any other overt manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s power that I was taught I should be seeing in my life as a Spirit-filled believer.<sup>60</sup>

- Did I lack faith?
- Was I sinning in some way that prevented this from happening?
- Did Jesus not really save me?

These were the kinds of questions I found myself asking. Looking back, my confusion and concerns weren’t rooted in a lack of faith or a persistent sin. It wasn’t even simply a matter of conflicting views on spiritual gifts.<sup>61</sup> The issue for me was that I didn’t really understand the Holy Spirit’s purpose and work in the life of a Christian. For that matter, I didn’t really understand the *identity* of the Holy Spirit.

It turns out, I wasn’t alone. Many Christians struggle to understand who or what the Holy Spirit is and His role in our lives.<sup>62</sup> The Holy Spirit is the God we don’t really know. He is the most easily

misunderstood Person of the Trinity,<sup>63</sup> the One it is easy for us to ignore, but without whom it is impossible for us to please God or become more like Christ.

## What or Who Is the Holy Spirit?

So here's the first question: what is the Holy Spirit? I say "what" intentionally because there are differing opinions in different religions. Jehovah's Witnesses believe the Spirit is not a person at all but an impersonal force, an expression of the power of God but not God Himself. Modern Judaism generally takes the same view. Mormons believe the Holy Spirit is a fully separate spiritual being from the Father and the Son. These groups reject the Spirit as a person and instead present Him as a thing.

A "what" rather than a "who."

The Scriptures themselves are emphatic: The Holy Spirit is God—not a manifestation of God's power or an impersonal force but God Himself. He is a Who (though not a resident of Whoville). As a Person of the Trinity, the Spirit is fully divine, just as the Father and Son are divine (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14), and He is in every way their equal. He is eternal (Heb. 9:14) and was present at the beginning of creation as the Father spoke the world into existence through the Son (Gen. 1:2). He is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-8), all-knowing (1 Cor. 2:10), and all-powerful (Zech. 4:6). He is holy, faithful, just, truthful, gracious, and merciful. He speaks, chooses, commands, grieves, teaches, seals, counsels, and comforts (Isa. 63:10; Luke 12:12; John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 5:3-4; 7:51; 13:2; Rom. 8:14; 1 Cor. 2:10-11; Eph. 4:30; Heb. 10:29).

If the Bible is true (and it is), then the Holy Spirit is a Person who acts in personal ways and to whom we can relate personally. A Person who, even now, is at work in the life of everyone who trusts in the person and work of Jesus.

## If You Have Christ, You Have the Spirit

The Holy Spirit begins the work of salvation, applying Christ's work to the believer. He replaces our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh, hearts that desire to love and please God (Ps. 104:30; Ezek. 36:26; John 3:5-7). He is the One who sustains us through our lives, helping us become more and more like Jesus until the day we stand before Him. He empowers us. He lives within us. He intercedes for us, carrying our prayers to the Father and aiding us when we are weak and ignorant of what to pray (Rom. 8:26). He aids us in properly interpreting the Bible.<sup>64</sup> He equips us for mission and gives each of us special gifts suited to our calling.

In other words, the Christian life is a Spirit-enabled and Spirit-filled life. A faithful Christian life is only possible with the Spirit's presence. And every single Christian—everyone who has been born again by the Spirit—has the Spirit within them. As Sinclair Ferguson put it, "To have the Spirit is to have Christ...Not to have the Spirit of Christ is to lack Christ."<sup>65</sup>

That is what's important for us to know as believers, and something I wish I had understood more from the very beginning. The Spirit is with us, all of us who are in Christ, right now. And as believers, we *should* earnestly seek to have a greater awareness of the Spirit's presence and power. To know Him better and to be led by Him; to be, as the Bible puts it, "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52). So how do we do that?

- 1. Through gratitude for the gospel.** The love we have for Christ is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in us. We don't naturally love the light (see John 3:19). It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for us to do so, as He revives our hearts and renews our desires. Gratitude for the gospel is gratitude for the Father sending His Son to be our righteousness, for

Christ's death on our behalf, and for the Spirit's work in us to make us more like our Savior.

- 2. Through His Word.** The Spirit speaks to us through the Scriptures. He reveals His will to us in the words He inspired to be written. The more we meditate on the Word, the deeper our relationship will go. "The Spirit moves us in the Word. The Spirit moves us to go deeper into that Word."<sup>66</sup>
- 3. Through our witness.** We experience the power of the Holy Spirit as we faithfully testify to the goodness of the gospel in word and deed. We trust Him to give us the right words to speak, and we count on Him to bring good out of our mistakes.

No matter what comes our way, if we trust Christ, the Holy Spirit is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will never stop comforting us and praying for us. And He will never stop transforming us into the image of Christ, who loves us and gave Himself for us.

## Study and Meditate

Psalms 104:30; 139:7-8; Isaiah 63:10; Luke 12:12; John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 5:3-4; 7:51; 13:2,52; Romans 8:14; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 9:14; 10:29

## Doctrines to Explore

- Deity of the Holy Spirit
- Personality of the Holy Spirit
- Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Christian

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Before reading this chapter, did you see the Holy Spirit as a power or a person?
2. How have you seen the Holy Spirit at work in your life?
3. How has the Holy Spirit gifted you for mission?

20.

## The E-Word

Because I didn't grow up in church, I had no idea that this one word could cause such a ruckus. I mean, it's in the Bible, after all. Jesus used it. So did John, and Peter. Paul used it too (a lot, actually). But this one word—I can't tell you how many times I've seen it misunderstood, misappropriated, and maligned. Which is a shame. It's such a beautiful word, one that offers so much hope because it puts God's sovereign goodness on display. So what is this word? *Election*.

### The Mystery We Can't Grasp

Election, as it appears in Scripture, is one of the most humbling and awe-inspiring doctrines in the Christian faith. It speaks to God's gracious purposes, His infinitely wise and holy will in regenerating, justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying sinners by faith in Jesus Christ, and His heart to redeem sinful people from all walks of life and welcome them into His family (Eph. 1:4-6).

This seems like such good news, doesn't it? So why do people bristle at this word? I wonder if it has to do with the mystery that surrounds it:

- **The mystery of “how.”** Most of our questions about election are attempts to peek “behind the veil,” as it were. We want to know exactly how God's will in salvation works with humanity's free agency, with our ability to make meaningful choices. But God doesn't tell us *how* these work together, only that they do.

- **The mystery of “why.”** Most of us are natural achievers. We want to be known, acknowledged, and celebrated for our accomplishments. But election undermines our ability to boast. It speaks to God’s purposes and will, to His glorious grace lavished upon spiritually dead people (Eph. 2:1-9). He doesn’t save anyone based on their ability to keep His commands because none of us can! Instead, He saves us because He loves us, and He loves us because He loves us.<sup>67</sup>
- **The mystery of “who.”** For others, the concern is the question of how election and evangelism work together. How many people will be saved? Are there people we shouldn’t share the gospel with? What happens if someone who isn’t elect repents and believes the gospel?

The mystery surrounding election reminds us of our limitations, both spiritually and intellectually. It is a pride killer, a profound truth that is simply too big for us. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t answers to some of the questions we ask, especially the ones about the mystery of “who.”

## The Means God Uses

Before returning to the Father, Jesus commissioned His followers to go into all the world and proclaim the gospel. In giving this commission, He didn’t tell them to look for a specific subset of people with signs above their heads that read, “Elect.”<sup>68</sup> God intends for this message to be shared with everyone, everywhere, without restriction. Let me say that again: The gospel is for all people in all places, without distinction. We may not know the how and the why, but we know the who. All are sinners who need salvation found only in Christ Jesus. And all of us who are under God’s grace—who have been saved through faith—are to proclaim the gospel to the nations. And as this

message is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit works in the heart of a person who has ears to hear, prompting and calling that individual to turn from sin and trust in Jesus.

That's how God works to call and to redeem His people. He calls us to proclaim the gospel to everyone, calling them to believe in Jesus, and some will. As much as we can be bewildered by questions about election, we can't lose sight of this mission. The call to believe the gospel along with the call of the Holy Spirit in the heart of those who hear it work together to bring people to faith in Christ (2 Tim. 1:8-10).

Who are the elect? Only God knows. Our responsibility is to call everyone to believe. God will take care of the rest.

## Study and Meditate

Ephesians 1–2; Romans 8–11; 2 Peter 1:10

## Doctrines to Explore

- Election
- Calling

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What, if anything, comes to mind when you think of the word *election*?
2. How has your understanding of the relationship between election and calling affected your understanding of our call to make disciples?
3. How can these doctrines encourage you to share the gospel with others?

21.

## You Must Be Born Again

Few men were used as mightily by God in the spread of the gospel in America and England as George Whitefield. A peer and one-time partner of John Wesley and his brother Charles Wesley, the English Methodist was a pioneer of open-air preaching, proclaiming God's offer of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus to more than 25,000 people at once. He was said to have preached some 18,000 sermons, with more than 3,000 on one subject. Imagine that: what could have been so captivating that he spoke on it so often?

The only way anyone can enter the kingdom of God—the new birth.

Whitefield's passion for proclaiming the new birth was unrelenting. And by God's grace, his passion resounded in the hearts of many who turned to Christ for salvation. But some who heard were confused about his unceasing proclamation of this one truth. Famously, one hearer confronted Whitefield on the matter and asked him why he kept preaching that we must be born again. Whitefield looked at him and replied, "Because, sir, you must be born again."<sup>69</sup>

Whitefield understood the call to be born again for what it is—really good news for spiritually lost people.

### Good News for Lost People

The Bible is pretty clear that human beings are something special. We're the only beings God created unlike any other, not simply speaking us into existence but forming us personally. We are called

His image bearers and charged to serve as stewards and cultivators of His creation. But we went and ruined everything by sinning against God—denying His goodness and authority, choosing to go our own way instead of faithfully following Him.

God doesn't shy away from describing the ugliness of humanity's spiritual condition in a post-fall world. "Corrupt," "haters of God," "lovers of darkness," "inventors of evil," "children under wrath," and "dead in your trespasses and sins" are among the more intense descriptions (John 3:19; Rom. 1:29-31; Eph. 2:1-3). These definitely don't give the impression that God is pleased with our sin. (He isn't.) Nor do they give the impression that we're particularly inclined to obey God. (We aren't.) Instead, the impression they give is that we are all in big trouble. (We are.)

So how do we get out of the trouble we're in? Our natural instincts tell us that we need to change ourselves. To be better people who behave differently, who try harder to be more moral, kind, and virtuous. But the Bible gives a different answer, a better answer: Instead of trying to be better people, we need to be *new* people.<sup>70</sup>

The Bible describes this as regeneration and renewal (Titus 3:5), being made alive in Christ (Eph. 2:4-5; Col. 2:13), or being born again (John 3:3-8; 1 Pet. 1:3,23; cf. 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1-4,18). All of these phrases describe a supernatural work of God—a heart change brought about by the Holy Spirit as a result of conviction of sin. A heart change to which we respond in repentance and faith as the Spirit works "down in the very depths of the personality, and put[s] there a new principle of life, something absolutely new, so that there is the 'new man.'"<sup>71</sup>

Whereas regeneration is God's divine work in our conversion, repentance and faith are ours, and these are two inseparable experiences of grace that flow into one another. Repentance is a change of mind and direction. It is turning from our sin and setting it

aside in heartfelt sorrow (Luke 5:1-11), but our response doesn't stop there. In our repentance, we turn from sin and we turn toward Christ in faith (Acts 26:15-20). A faith that isn't merely offering mental assent to historical facts but one that creates within us a heartfelt recognition and confession of the truth of the gospel and a desire to humble ourselves before Christ as our Lord and Savior (John 1:10-13; 1 John 4:13-16). And as we turn to Christ in repentance and faith, beginning a life of imperfectly following Him (Ps. 119:57-60), we gradually become more like Him because of the Holy Spirit's continual work in us. We become new people with new desires and new loves. Transformed people, no longer set on loving darkness, but now loving the light. Hopeful people, who live trusting in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for our salvation and who still respond to conviction of sin in repentance and faith.

## God Saves Sinners (and Is Saving Us Still)

The new birth, regeneration, being born again—whatever (biblical) language you prefer using, it is truly good news for all of us. Regeneration, at its heart, simply means this: God saves sinners (cf. 1 Tim. 1:15), and He is still saving sinners. Whenever any of us shares the gospel in any form—whether we're preaching from a pulpit, having a conversation in a coffee shop, or writing a letter, an email, or a blog post—we, like Whitefield, can do so confidently because the Spirit is at work. He is drawing people to Himself. He is convicting people. He is bringing new life. He is transforming those who respond in repentance and faith into the image of Christ.

And as we continue to struggle with sin, in those moments when we are tempted to despair, we can still have hope because the Spirit is at work. He faithfully continues to shape us into the image of Christ

day by day. He continues to convict us of sin and draw us back to Christ in repentance and faith. And He will continue this work in all who believe until the day they stand before Jesus and all things are made new.

## Study and Meditate

John 1:10-13; 3:1-21; 1 Peter 1; 1 John 4:13-16

## Doctrines to Explore

- Repentance
- Faith
- Regeneration

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Why is the doctrine of regeneration good news for us as we share the gospel?
2. Some believe faith is blind. How does the Christian's faith challenge this idea?
3. Repentance and faith are inseparable. Why is this good news for you right now?

22.

## Imperfectly Becoming Perfect

A young woman was about to be baptized, and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She shared her experience of growing up with Christian parents and how the faith she grew up around eventually became her own. As she finished her story, she said something I'll never forget:

"I want to do this as a way to pay God back for all He's done for me."

My heart broke for her. I wasn't grieved because I doubted the sincerity of her belief in Jesus, of course. It was that she was setting herself up for failure. She had placed a burden on herself she wasn't meant to carry, one that Jesus literally had to die to take from her—the burden of earning God's favor, of deserving His kindness.

She wasn't alone in this, of course. Many of us struggle to believe that there's nothing we can do to earn our standing before God. We want to believe that we can do enough good to cancel out all the bad we've done and maybe even earn God's forgiveness and acceptance, at least in part. Anything else seems unnatural to us, whether we're talking about everyday life or spiritual matters. What the gospel offers us seems too easy, so it can't possibly be true.

And what is it the gospel offers? Grace.

## So Good It Can Only Be True

Every religion with some kind of concept of sin has to address how to

be seen as just, or righteous, in the eyes of God. Maybe a simpler way to explain it is with this question: How can we make up for our sins? And these religions usually come to the same conclusion: The key to righteousness is some kind of combination of faith and works, with the latter usually having a greater emphasis than the former. Beliefs may matter, but deeds matter more.<sup>72</sup>

And then there's what Christians believe. We believe what we do matters, of course (we'll get to that in a second). But we don't see our works as a means of earning God's favor because there's no way for us to offset the offense of our sin against a perfect and holy God. Instead, we understand that God's favor comes to us one way, and one way alone—through faith in Jesus Christ, the only truly righteous Person, the only Person who perfectly obeyed God in every way. That's what Christians mean by the term *justification by faith*: A person is declared objectively righteous before God, not based on personal merit but by faith in the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 8:33-34; Eph. 2:8-9). Righteousness, or justification, is something none of us can earn but is freely given to all who trust in Christ. And through our justification, we are pardoned and declared to be in right standing before God, no longer estranged but adopted into His family.

## Real Righteousness—and Real Transformation—for Us

Justification is more than a legal declaration. It is not hollow, like a chocolate bunny that looks solid but is filled with air. With the declaration comes true righteousness—the righteousness of Christ, who became sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21). His righteousness is transferred to us, even as our sin is transferred to Him (Rom. 5:17; 1 Cor. 1:30).<sup>73</sup> Because Jesus' righteousness is given to us by faith, God the Father doesn't see our sins but sees Christ's righteousness as ours (Rom. 4:6).

When we believe in Jesus, we are given all the righteousness we ever need to be welcome in God's family. But God isn't content to leave us positionally righteous. He is actively making us righteous through a process we call *sanctification*. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, our hearts, minds, and character are transformed to reflect Christ's. We are being made *like* Him in a process that carries on throughout our entire lives (Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Thess. 2:13).<sup>74</sup>

Someday that transformation will be complete, on the day we stand before Jesus, whether at our death or at His return to rule and reign over the earth (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:22). Then we will be glorified, free from the presence and stain of sin in our lives, with perfected physical bodies upon our resurrection and a fuller knowledge and understanding of God—fully knowing as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12; Phil. 3:20-21).

## Live in Light of Who You Are

Because it's so unnatural for us, we are all prone to slip into forgetfulness. It's so easy for us to believe that good works will lead to justification and all the blessings that come from it. And even when we do believe that we're justified by faith, we feel like we have to earn it to keep it. The funny thing is that this kind of approach is a losing proposition—it only leads to disaster.

There is a damaging idea floating around that says, "God saved you, now what are you going to do for him?" This is a recipe for failure. If you come to the table believing you can do anything for God in your own strength or repay him on any level, you have already lost. You are back to confessing your self-dependent spiritual death from which Jesus saved you.<sup>75</sup>

So what are we supposed to do then? Good works. But here's the thing: When we're commanded to do good works—which we are—it's not because we're trying to earn anything. Justification is not the fruit of good works; rather, good works are the fruit of justification (Eph. 2:10). They are evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, proof that our faith is genuine, living, and active (Jas. 2:17). We seek to do good works as a reflection of who Christ has made us through the power of the Spirit's transforming work in our lives, from gratitude and love we feel *from* being accepted by God, not so we might be accepted by Him.

You and I have no power to pay God back for anything, any more than you and I have the ability to earn our justification in the first place. We “go and sin no more” (see John 8:11) by His grace alone, not by our own strength. Our standing before God is given to us by grace. The life we live is lived by grace. The works we do are works of grace. This way of living is different from any other. It is completely unnatural to us, but it's the kind of good news we need in order to truly live. It's the kind of good news the rest of the world needs. It's good news that's so good it must be true.

## Study and Meditate

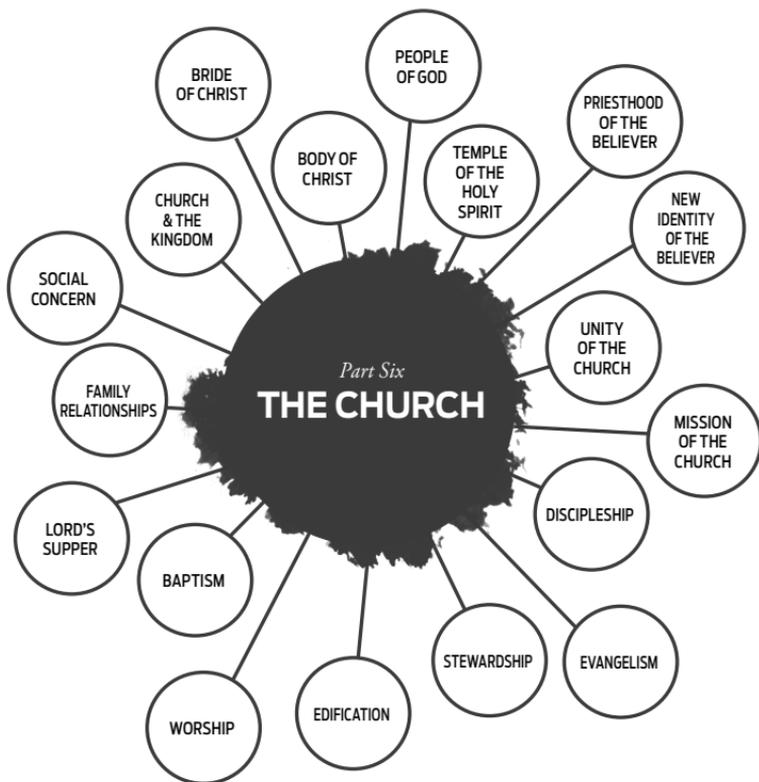
Romans 4–8; Galatians 3–5; Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:17

## Doctrines to Explore

- Justification by Faith
- Justification and Works
- Imputation
- Sanctification
- Glorification

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Does justification by faith seem too good to be true? Why or why not?
2. Think about your attitude to the works you do (serving, giving, etc.). Is there a feeling of needing to earn God's approval? Why or why not?
3. How does justification by faith free you to love and serve the lost around you right now?



*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

—1 Peter 2:9

23.

## The One and Manyess of the Church

As a new believer, I began a quest to know everything I could about my new faith and the object of my faith, Jesus. I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I read about prayer, evangelism, suffering, salvation, grace, and Scripture (I even read Scripture too). But I hit a wall when I reached one specific topic: the church. Don't get me wrong; I found plenty to read, but a lot of it was just as confused as I was. Most of what I found was about deconstructing (but rarely reconstructing) our ideas about what church is or should be. I read about incarnational churches, organic churches, authentic churches, deep churches, and more. But in the end I still wasn't sure what makes the church *the church*. And worse, I didn't really understand the different ways the Bible describes the church.

### United Here, Now, and Throughout All Time

In general, the Bible doesn't describe the church the way we often do, that is, a church isn't referred to as a building or a location or even an event. Instead, the church, in virtually every instance of the word, is used in reference to the people of God in two key ways:

**First, as God's people in one location**, a group of believers who have covenanted together to celebrate and proclaim the good news of the

gospel. Whether in a 30,000 square-foot facility, a school cafeteria, or under a tree, it is an expression of the church.

**Second, as God’s people in all times and places.** Regardless of language, ethnicity, or moment in history, all who have trusted in Christ’s death and resurrection are united together as the church.

Whatever else we want to say about the church, it is absolutely essential for us to keep this unity as our first priority: The people of God—all who have been redeemed by Christ—are the church (2 Cor. 6:16). Together. Our positions on secondary doctrinal issues,<sup>76</sup> our political views, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, language, or anything else we can think of to divide people into different groups don’t exclude us from being the church. The church is God’s people, uniquely and wonderfully made individuals, united in the gospel, a reflection of the oneness of the Trinity, living as witnesses to God’s kingdom here, now, and throughout all time (Matt. 28:18-20; John 17:20-23).<sup>77</sup>

## United as Body and Bride, Temple and Priests

While the church is the people of God, the Bible also describes the church using a number of different metaphors:

1. **The church is the body of Christ**, living as Christ’s representatives here on earth, under His authority as the head of the body (Col. 1:18), and dependent upon one another as we grow in grace and live on mission (1 Cor. 12).
2. **The church is the bride of Christ**, joyfully bound in a lasting covenant with Christ our redeemer, longing for the day of His return, when the bride and groom are united forever (Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9; 22:17).

3. **The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit**, indwelt both individually and corporately, empowered for encouragement and mission, and bearing the fruit that can only be the result of the Spirit's presence in our lives (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 12:12-13, 13; Gal. 5:22-23).
4. **The church is a priesthood of believers**, free to approach God with boldness because we have been redeemed by Christ (Rom. 5:1-5; Heb. 4:14-16).

A body. A bride. A temple. A priesthood. Through each of these metaphors, two themes emerge: unity and diversity. We're united to one another, dependent upon each other in the body and on Christ as the head of the body. We're united with Christ, just as a husband and wife are united in marriage (Eph. 5:22-23). We're united with God and one another as the Spirit dwells within us, all of us having the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:11). We are united in our calling as a "royal priesthood" and in our access to the Father through the Son (1 Pet. 2:9). But in our unity, we also see the embrace of diversity.

We are the body, but *every part of the body plays a different role*. We are the bride, but *the bride is distinct from the bridegroom* (but we'll talk about that in a few pages). We all have the same Spirit, but *the gifts He gives to each of us are unique to His purposes for us*. We are one priesthood and share the same access with the Father, but *we also hear one another's confessions and pray for one another*.

And this dual reality, that we are diverse people united as one people in Christ, is what allows the church's mission to make disciples to flourish. All of us are equally empowered for the task. All of us share the same Spirit's inexhaustible power. All of us have the same gospel to proclaim. But we are all called to do so in different contexts and with different gifts to meet the needs of the time and place in which God has called us to make disciples.

This is the kind of understanding of the church I was looking for all those years ago. An understanding that celebrates both the unity and diversity of God's people—one church and many churches all working together in our shared mission *as* the church.

## Study and Meditate

John 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 2:11-22; 4:4-7,11-13; Revelation 19

## Doctrines to Explore

- Church and Kingdom
- Bride of Christ
- Body of Christ
- People of God
- Temple of the Holy Spirit
- Priesthood of the Believer
- Unity of the Church
- Mission of the Church

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Why does it matter to understand the church as God's people both locally and universally?
2. How has God gifted you to serve in your local church?
3. How has God equipped your local church to fulfill our shared mission of making disciples?

24.

## The Secret of Spiritual Maturity

How do you grow as a disciple, or follower, of Jesus? What does it look like? Is there a secret to growing in our faith?

I suspect I'm not alone in having asked questions like these, even if we have some knowledge of their answers. After all, many of us understand discipleship on some level as a process. It's the cumulative effect of formal and informal instruction and activities throughout every area of life, in all times and places (Deut. 6:4-9; Acts 20:17-24). The classes we take, the books we read, the one-on-one conversations we engage in, the podcasts we listen to—all of these play a part in our growth in spiritual maturity. But when I think about my own growth in maturity, I see that the times when I've grown the fastest and healthiest have all had one thing in common: I wasn't alone.

As I've talked with others, I've found many of us have similar stories. Spiritual growth isn't just a matter of private reading, study, and prayer. It's also connected to what happens in relationship with other Christians through the local church. The church is the context of discipleship, as we welcome new believers, build one another up in the gospel, and remember the gospel together.

## Welcoming New Believers into Gospel Community

By faith in Jesus, we are adopted into God's family as beloved children and simultaneously welcomed us into a new community, the church. In response, all believers are commanded to be baptized (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38). Baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is our first step as disciples, the first act of obedience, a never-to-be-repeated event, symbolizing our faith in our crucified, buried, and risen Savior:

- our death to sin as we are plunged into the water;
- the burial of our old life as we are below the surface;
- our resurrection to new life in Christ as we are raised again.

A believer's baptism is an event to be celebrated. It is the recognition of God's work in giving new life to a lost sinner, and with baptism we welcome him or her into fellowship as our brother or sister in Christ. And that celebration leads us to build one another up in the gospel.

## Building One Another Up in the Gospel

The word we often use for this work is *edification*, which refers to encouragement to grow and mature both individually and collectively. Whether through preaching and teaching in formal settings (Eph. 4:11-13), one-on-one counseling, or informal gatherings, edification does two things:

1. It encourages us to grow deeper in our understanding of our identity as believers—new creations, beloved children of God. We have been delivered from darkness and now belong to the kingdom of light, in which we become more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:1-10,19; Col. 1:13).

2. It equips us to live on mission as ambassadors of the kingdom of God (2 Cor. 5:20).

Edification is discipleship in the truest sense, the work of building one another up as believers, encouraging each other as we live in relationship together (1 Cor. 12:26; Gal. 6:2).

## Remembering the Gospel Together

Discipleship begins as we are welcomed into fellowship, which we celebrate in our baptism. It grows as we seek to build one another up in the gospel. And it deepens as we remember the gospel together in our celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper, or communion, is a symbolic act of obedience. Baptized members of the church partake of bread and the fruit of the vine in a powerful and multisensory reminder of the gospel:

- In the bread, we remember that Christ's body was broken for us.
- In the fruit of the vine, we recall that His blood was shed for us.

The Lord's Supper tells us that the life we now live, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20). It creates a sense of longing for the day when He returns and we see Him face-to-face and fully know as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12). The Lord's Supper reminds us of both the cost and the promise of our discipleship.

## Growing into Godliness Together

Hopefully you recognize something of your own experience in what I've shared, even if it's only to the tiniest degree. After all, no church is perfect. Sin rears its ugly head even in the most consistent and faithful of our communities. And some of us bear the scars of wounds caused

by other believers—wounds so painful that growing together seems impossible. But no matter how discouraging our experiences may seem, God’s means of growing His people hasn’t changed. Discipleship is, as it always has been, a communal activity, as we welcome new believers into fellowship, as we build one another up in the gospel, and as we remember the gospel together.

## Study and Meditate

Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:26; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; 6:2; Ephesians 2:1-10,19; 4:11-13; Colossians 1:13

## Doctrines to Explore

- New Identity of the Believer
- Discipleship
- Edification
- Baptism
- Lord’s Supper

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Why is the church essential for growing as a disciple?
2. How has your membership in a local church helped you grow as a follower of Jesus?
3. What can you do to build another believer up in the gospel today?

25.

## A Bigger View of Worship

*Worship.* What's the first word that comes to mind when you read this word? Chances are, if you're like most people, the word you're thinking of is "music" or "singing." This makes sense because we often use the word as shorthand for congregational singing. And while this isn't wrong, it is incomplete. The Bible doesn't place these kinds of limits on what it means to be a worshiper.

The Hebrew and Greek words we usually translate as "worship" describe an act of deference or reverence—bowing or kneeling. This is important for us to remember when we think about worship. Worship is a posture of the heart, sometimes referred to in the Bible as "the fear of the LORD" (Prov. 1:7). It is the desire to give God all the praise He is due as our Creator and Savior, which means it can't be limited to one act or situation. It encompasses every aspect of our lives, from stewarding all God's gifts to honoring the image of God in humanity, and yes, even singing.

### Worshippers Are Singers

Even though we often reduce worship to singing, we can't forget that Scripture is absolutely clear that singing songs of praise *is* a part of what it means to be worshipers:

- "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted; he has thrown the horse and its rider into the sea" (Ex. 15:1);
- "I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel" (Judg. 5:3);

- “I will sing praises about your name” (2 Sam. 22:50);
- “I will sing about the name of the LORD Most High” (Ps. 7:17);
- “I will also sing praise with my understanding” (1 Cor. 14:15);
- “...Speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19);
- “Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Col. 3:16).

A biblical view of worship is more than singing songs of praise, but it certainly isn't *less*. We should not neglect the opportunity to encourage one another through our songs and to declare the greatness of God to the non-believers in our midst. Singing, in this respect, is a gift for us to steward.

## Worshippers Are Stewards

That word *steward* is important because it calls us back to God's intention in creating humanity in the first place (Gen. 1:28; 1 Cor. 4:1-2). As worshippers, we are called to use what God has given us to make His glory known throughout the world with our time, talents, and treasures (Matt. 25:14-30).

- **Time.** As created beings, we are called to make the most of each day, using our time well for God's glory. We work hard as though we are working for the Lord (Col. 3:23), but we also rest. We take the time necessary to care for ourselves, acknowledging our limitations as created beings because even they are a gift from God—a reminder that we are not Him.

- **Talents.** God gifts each of us with unique abilities, both spiritual gifts and natural talents, which we are called to use in service of others as “good stewards of the varied grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). As long as we live, we are to develop and use these talents to their fullest extent to the glory of God.
- **Treasures.** We are to manage according to God’s purposes the finances and material possessions He provides us with. This means striving to live within our means as well as regularly, sacrificially, joyfully, and prayerfully giving financially toward God’s kingdom work out of a desire to see Him glorified in the world (Prov. 3:9; Matt. 6:1-4; Mark 12:41-44; 1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:6-7).<sup>78</sup>

## Worshippers Honor God’s Image

Worship calls us to honor God in all things, and this includes honoring God’s image in humanity. We are to pursue human flourishing, working for the good of all people without compromising our loyalty to Christ and the truth (Mic. 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:2). This means:

- We actively oppose racism and celebrate ethnic diversity because humanity was created by a God who loves diversity and will be worshiped by a “vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language” in the new creation (Rev. 7:9).
- We actively defend the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. We protect the right for human beings to be born, give families to orphans, and help those in need through acts of compassion and generosity because all human beings are valued by God and have the right to flourish.
- We actively oppose sexual immorality—including adultery, pornography, and homosexual practice—not out of a spirit of fear or hatred but because they are contrary to God’s good

design for humanity. We also advocate for marriage between one man and one woman as the context for healthy sexuality.

But our efforts aren't limited to three spheres, which is why we are to be concerned about moral character in leaders, be engaged in the public square, and oppose greed, selfishness, and any other vice that threatens to harm God's image bearers. Worshipers are to encourage the principles of righteousness, truth, and love for the good of all and to the glory of God.

## Embracing Worship in Its Fullness

All of this barely scratches the surface of what it means to be a worshiper. Every area of life, no matter how seemingly mundane, provides us with virtually endless opportunities to worship our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. In our work, parenting, resting, celebrating, giving, and even singing, let's take advantage of each of these opportunities so His goodness may be known to others.

## Study and Meditate

Proverbs 3:9; Micah 6:8; Matthew 6:1-4; Mark 12:41-44; Ephesians 5:19; 6:5-9; 1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7; 1 Thessalonians 3:2

## Doctrines to Explore

- Stewardship
- Worship
- Social Concern

## Reflect and Discuss

1. How have you typically understood worship?
2. How have you seen worship make God's glory known to others?
3. In what areas of your life do you see opportunities to worship Christ to a greater extent?

26.

## The Meaning of Marriage

Whenever I read anything—*anything*—about marriage in the news, it makes me sad. It's so rare to see a story about a couple that's maintained a healthy, loving relationship for fifty or sixty years, or really any article that gives a positive view on marriage in general (though it does happen on occasion). Instead, it's usually headlines like “The Sexist and Racist History of Marriage That No One Talks About,”<sup>79</sup> and “Is an Open Marriage a Happier Marriage?”<sup>80</sup> Not to mention the plethora of stories surrounding rising divorce statistics, plummeting birth rates, and the West's shockingly fast legalization and acceptance of same-sex marriage.

Believe it or not, we live in a culture that is fascinated with the idea of marriage. We talk about it a lot, even if it's to say that we don't really need it. But our culture is one that has no idea what it is or why it exists. Some think of marriage as being intended for companionship, having children, or personal fulfillment. Many argue that it is purely a social construct, a contractual arrangement that has no more power or benefit to society than cohabitation.

But Christians have a radical, scandalous view of marriage, one so shocking it can barely be uttered in polite company—that marriage exists to glorify God.

## A God-Glorifying Commitment

When God created the world, He described only one thing as not good: the man He made was alone (Gen. 2:18). So He created a helper suitable for him, someone to be his equal, his partner in the task of subduing and filling the earth: the first woman. When the man saw her, he couldn't help himself.

“At last!” he cried with delight (Gen. 2:23). Here was the one he'd been waiting for, searching for, the one who was “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” From that moment on, the man wasn't alone; there was one who was like him but different from him. And the two became one, naked yet unashamed (Gen. 2:24-25).

The first marriage—the first *family*.

Marriage is a covenant uniting one man and one woman before God for a lifetime. A God-glorifying commitment through which they could enjoy intimate companionship, freely engage in sexual expression (Heb. 13:4), and bear and raise children (Gen. 1:28). Marriage and the family that results from it are the foundation of human society, a unique expression of our nature as image bearers of God.

## A Picture of God and His People

But marriage is more than a commitment between a man and woman for life. It is more than a place for us to enjoy intimacy and raise children. Marriage itself is a picture of how God relates to His people—a picture of Christ and His bride, the church, a living parable of the gospel as husbands love their wives and wives respect their husbands (Eph. 5:33):

- **Loving as Christ loves.** A husband is called to love his wife, just as Christ loves the church, spending himself for her good, helping her to flourish and grow in godliness. He provides for,

protects, and leads his family as a servant, humbling himself and sacrificing his own desires for the good of those he loves.<sup>81</sup>

- **Submitting as though to Christ.** A wife is called to submit herself graciously to her husband's servant leadership, as the church submits to Christ, treating him with respect as her equal, as a fellow image bearer of God. She serves as his helper—his *partner*—in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.<sup>82</sup>

This is God's design for marriage. It is what makes marriage make sense. "If God had the gospel of Jesus's salvation in mind when he established marriage, then marriage only 'works' to the degree that approximates the pattern of God's self-giving love in Christ."<sup>83</sup>

## Honoring God's Scandalous Design

In our current time, this design for marriage is considered scandalous as the surrounding culture continually redefines marriage. Marriage and family are no longer the foundation of society but simply a source of personal fulfillment. No longer a covenant between a man and a woman for a lifetime but a contract between any number and combination of people so long as all parties feel it is beneficial. Seeking to recreate marriage in our own image, we've been left with a confused mess of broken relationships and broken people.

But God's design for marriage still stands. It existed from the beginning and will only end when the shadow gives way to substance—when Christ returns for His bride and our voices join a vast multitude that sounds "of cascading waters, and like the rumbling of loud thunder" in saying,

Hallelujah, because our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns! Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself.

She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints. (Rev. 19:6-8)

Until that day, Christians have the opportunity to show the world how marriage was intended to work, to demonstrate God's pattern for marriage so that others—especially the children who join their families—may learn from their examples. To put the glory of God on display, to invite others to follow us as we follow Christ, albeit imperfectly, and to join us in rejoicing at the marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).

## Study and Meditate

Genesis 2; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 5:22-33; 6:1-4;  
Revelation 19:6-9

## Doctrines to Explore

- Family Relationships

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Think of the different marriages you saw growing up. How did those examples shape your understanding of marriage?
2. Our culture continually tries to redefine marriage. Are those redefinitions working? Why or why not?
3. How can you model God's design for marriage, whether you are married or not?

## Go Forth, Timid Evangelists

If you ever wanted to kill a believer's evangelistic zeal, a sermon or book on evangelism is almost always a surefire way to do it. Although there are a number of very helpful books on the subject,<sup>84</sup> too many share one of three common messages:

1. We are all required to share the gospel with the lost, and if we're not seeing people come to Christ because of our efforts, we're not being fruitful or faithful Christians. Evangelism is about performing a duty.
2. Love and serve your friends and neighbors into the kingdom. "Preach the gospel always, and if necessary use words," as the saying goes. Evangelism isn't as much about a message as it is about your life.
3. Stories of personal successes and strategies, usually all ending in how the author or speaker is skilled at "closing the deal." Evangelism, in this case, is about adding to my righteousness before God (in other words, bragging rights).

I often describe myself as a timid evangelist, so much so that I joke with people that God is so serious about me sharing the gospel that He gave me a job with "gospel" in its name. I've seen God use my efforts to share the gospel to help people on their spiritual journeys: some have been strengthened in their faith, and others have started to question what they believe (and started looking more honestly at Jesus). But I've also had people, after asking how I came to faith, back

away like I have two heads (to be fair, it's a long and weird kind of story). Like many, I question the effectiveness of my ability to share the gospel. If pressed, I don't know that I'd be comfortable saying with certainty that this or that person came to Christ because I happened to be the one sharing the gospel that day. I worry as much as anyone about saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and turning them "off" of Jesus (although I honestly don't know if that's possible). My doubts about my own abilities aside, I do fight against my timidity, particularly in the weird and unexpected moments when you can't *not* share the gospel. Why?

Because Jesus has commanded all of us to make disciples.

## The Danger of "Duty Only" Evangelism

Every Christian, regardless of his or her gifts, personality type, or confidence level, is called to share the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Every Christian is called to play a role in making disciples from all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). God really does expect me to share the gospel message using my words, no matter how awkward or feeble I might feel. *And* He really does expect me to live in such a way that serves as a testimony to the truth of that message. And He expects the same of you.

In one sense, evangelism *is* a duty. But it has to be more than that. If we only see evangelism as a duty, then we're defeated before we even start. If we're "good" at it—that is, we find it easy to share the gospel with others at any time or place or we've been part of leading someone to faith—we can easily become proud, thinking our success is because of something in us. But if we stutter and stumble, if we lack confidence and generally feel like failures before we've opened our mouths, we're probably not going to bother with it at all.

And then the guilt over disobedience comes.

## Good News for Timid Evangelists

But what we have to see is that evangelism is both a duty *and* a privilege (Rom. 1:14-16). That's strange, I know, but it's true. The gospel message is the most important news that anyone can ever hear. It is the news that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has made a way for sinners like us to be rescued, redeemed, and welcomed into His family as beloved children. Each one of us who has trusted in Jesus knows this because we've experienced it.

And God has entrusted that message to people like you and me. Ordinary, messed-up, sinful, and slowly-being-sanctified people who don't know what they're doing half the time. Okay, most of the time. Fine, all the time. That probably doesn't make it sound like a privilege. At least, not until you realize that God not only gives us the duty of sharing the message but also gives the ability to carry it out—and frees us from the responsibility of “closing the deal.” And that is really good news, especially for timid evangelists like me. God gives us the Holy Spirit, who gives us what we ought to say when we need it (Luke 12:11-12). God calls us sowers of the “seed” of the gospel and releases us from feeling responsible for making it grow in someone's heart (Luke 8:4-15). We should come to the duty and privilege of evangelism with a heart of compassion and concern for the lost (2 Cor. 5:20), but we don't need to worry about messing it up. And God says we don't need to fear people's responses because we are the means by which He has sovereignly declared the nations will be reached (Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8).

So think about the opportunities you have in your life. Who is one person who needs to hear the gospel? Take the opportunity God gives you to share Christ with this person. Don't let any moment pass. Embrace your duty as the privilege it is.

# Study and Meditate

Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 8:4-18; 24; Romans 10:1-17

## Doctrines to Explore

- Evangelism

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What is your greatest hesitation about sharing the gospel?
2. Is it challenging for you to understand evangelism as a privilege? Why or why not?
3. Who is one person in your life that you know needs to hear the gospel message? What steps will you take to share this message with this person?



*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth;  
for the first heaven and the first earth had passed  
away, and the sea was no more.”*

*—Revelation 21:1*

28.

## The Question Everyone's Asking

A few years ago, I participated in a personal evangelism workshop, and we were given an assignment: Ask one friend or family member what they believe happens when we die, and then just listen. Don't debate, question, or challenge. Just listen. My wife and I asked a few people we knew, and the responses were fascinating:

- One said he didn't believe anything happens. We just die, and that's it.
- Another said she had no idea and hadn't given it any thought (a response which, perhaps ironically, required her to think about it).
- Another said she believed she'll become one with the universe and simply cease to be.

My favorite, though, was a family member who gave a very complex and intricate description of how his actions would reverberate throughout the cosmos for all of history, so therefore, he tries to be as morally upright as possible. (Of course, how "morally upright" is defined is open to interpretation.)

This exercise was helpful because it reminded me that most of us, with rare exception, have asked what happens when we die at one time or another. We all know death is coming, and so we all have some concept of what happens, whether it's achieving nothingness, merely decomposing, or even going to heaven.

## The Good and Bad News About Death Not Being the End

The Bible has a lot to say about this subject. In fact, it provides the definitive answer to the question. The short answer is that for everyone, whether they are Christians or not, death isn't the end. But what happens after death for the Christian and the non-Christian is very different.

When a Christian dies, he or she immediately enters the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8). Some refer to this as an intermediate state because our final state is a bodily resurrection that happens following the second coming of Christ (1 Cor. 15:50-57). Calling it an intermediate state might call to mind images of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, but they're nothing alike. There's no waiting or delay. Jesus doesn't wait for us to be sufficiently purified before we get to stand before Him. When we die, we are with Him. And we *keep* being with Him after our bodily resurrection and the world is made new.

However, when someone who hasn't trusted in Jesus dies, what awaits is eternal separation from Christ and experiencing the consequences of their sins. Because they died apart from Jesus, their condemnation for sin remains on them (John 3:36). They enter eternity carrying the weight of their offenses against an infinite and holy God and are judged accordingly (Matt. 25:41-46; Luke 16:19-31; Heb. 9:27). Death apart from Christ means no hope of forgiveness, no more opportunity for repentance. There is only eternal, never-ending suffering in hell.

## Why We Need to Be Honest About Hell

A few years ago, a now ex-pastor wrote a book redefining hell and judgment to the point that neither objectively existed—at least not in

the way the Bible describes them. In his interpretation, hell is about what we do to one another, and judgment, well, honestly, I'm still not entirely clear on where he was going with that. The only thing that was certain is that even if there were a place of eternal torment, it would ultimately be empty because God loves us too much to let anyone stay there.

Few of us go to this extreme, but all of us are tempted to push hell aside. Sometimes we'll downplay the seriousness of the final consequences of sin. Sometimes we hold it at arm's length because it's too unpleasant to deal with and we don't want to be seen as fear-mongering, trying to scare people straight, or acting as arbiters of who is inside and outside the kingdom of God. But this results in a counterfeit gospel, one that ultimately diminishes the need to share the gospel message and undermines our witness.<sup>85</sup> We have to be clear about this: A diminished gospel is no gospel at all. It is not loving to downplay or redefine the nature of hell. If we love those who are far from Christ, we need to tell them the truth about the good news *and* the bad news that makes the good news better. As J. C. Ryle wrote,

The throne of grace will not always be standing: it will be removed one day, and the throne of judgment will be set up in its place. The door of salvation by faith in Christ will not always be open: it will be shut one day forever...The fountain for all sin and uncleanness will not always be accessible: the way to it will one day be barred, and there will remain nothing but the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.<sup>86</sup>

Reading this gives me a sense of urgency, even as it makes me thankful that the door is still open. There is still time to take advantage of every opportunity to share the good news. And I want to take those opportunities. I want to be able to tell people about what God has done by sending Jesus into the world. I want more people to join Him with me when He finally does return. I suspect you do too.

So take those opportunities. Take the moments God gives you to share Christ. Don't be afraid to be honest about what really happens when we die because we all need to know. Don't let any moment pass. The time is short for us to do good in this world. Let's make the most of it.

## Study and Meditate

Matthew 25:41-46; Luke 16:19-31; 23:43; 1 Corinthians 15;  
2 Corinthians 5:8; Hebrews 9:27

## Doctrines to Explore

- Life After Death
- Nature of Hell

## Reflect and Discuss

1. Have you ever had a conversation with a friend about what he or she believes will happen when we die? What did your friend say? If you haven't, whom can you ask?
2. Why is it important to share both sides of what happens after we die?
3. How does the Bible's vision of life after death motivate you to share the gospel with others?

29.

## The Moment We're All Waiting For

A friend and I were talking after we had just completed a fast ahead of Good Friday. A group of us had come together (new believers all) and were talking about the importance of Easter. My friend looked concerned. When I asked him why, he said, “What if Jesus already came back, and we missed it?”

My friend wasn't alone. People have wondered about the mystery of when Jesus would return for centuries. They've scoured the Scriptures looking for a code to help unlock the secrets of the Book of Revelation. Many have written speculative fiction about what might happen when He does return. A few have even asked my friend's fearful question. And just as believers have wondered and speculated, false teachers and cult leaders have been spreading lies, offering “definitive” dates or declarations that it has already happened (see 2 Thess 2:1-2). So far no one's been able to figure it out.

### What We Know About Jesus' Return

Maybe your only exposure to the second coming of Jesus has been through weird Internet memes, fiction, or false teaching. Maybe you're pretty well versed in the subject. Regardless, we should always remind ourselves of what the Bible actually says about Jesus' return:

- It will be unexpected (Matt. 24:44);
- Everyone will notice (Matt. 24:30-31);
- Jesus will have a physical body (Matt. 24–25);
- His power and glory will be fully seen (Matt. 24:30);
- Jesus will judge the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 25:31-46);
- Sin and death will end (Rev. 21:1-4);
- All creation will be redeemed (Rev. 21–22); and
- Only the Father knows when that will be (Matt. 24:36).

Those are the essentials of what Scripture says about Jesus' second coming, or at least the points where Christians have been in general agreement for the last two thousand years. But there are some points on which not all have been able to agree. The millennial reign is one of these (Rev. 20). Some of the most brilliant theological minds in history have disagreed on this. Clement, Augustine, Martin Luther, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and Adrian Rogers all had different views on this subject. Maybe you've been taught one of these common interpretations:

- Jesus will return to rule on earth for a literal thousand years before the final judgment;
- The millennial reign is happening right now in the church age to be followed by His return; or
- The millennium represents Christ's reign in heaven and in the hearts of His people while we wait for His return.

Regardless of what you believe on this point (and there are biblical cases for all three), all three agree on the end: when Jesus returns, all things will be made new. Death will die. Sin will end. And finally we will be made fully new. Jesus' return is what every Christian longs for, the hope of every believer. We might not all agree on the specifics of how, but we all can, and should, agree on the why.

# How We Should Live While We Wait

So we know what we're waiting for, and we know it hasn't happened yet. We don't need to fear that we've missed Jesus' return because when it happens, everyone will know. So how, then, are we supposed to live? Here are two suggestions:

1. **Among believers, live humbly.** We should all be convinced in our own minds regarding these events (Rom. 14:5). We should know what we believe and why. But because the end times are so full of mystery, we should be willing to admit that we might be wrong and be open to correction based on Scripture.
2. **Among unbelievers, live hopefully.** The Christian story is great news for the whole world. The “blessed hope” we await, the return of Jesus, motivates us to live differently in the world (Titus 2:11-14). To live out of hope rather than fear and to invite others to share in this promise.

## Study and Meditate

Matthew 24–25; 2 Thessalonians 2

## Doctrines to Explore

- Second Coming of Christ

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What have you been taught about the second coming of Jesus? Did it seem like good news or bad?
2. How does what you've read encourage or challenge you?
3. How does the promise of Jesus' return motivate you to live on mission?

30.

## The World We Can't Imagine

Almost every science fiction tale is built around one of two concepts: a utopian fantasy or a dystopian nightmare. Dystopias are what you would find in books and movies like *The Hunger Games*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 1984, or the timeline where Biff Tannen has taken over Hill Valley in *Back to the Future Part II*. They are our worst fears brought to life. The utopian fantasy, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. It is the world as we would all like it to be. It is the world in which humanity has evolved out of its propensity toward conflict and is spreading a message of peace, tolerance, and currency-free economics throughout the galaxy. So, *Star Trek*.

I've always been fascinated by both kinds of storytelling, but I generally find the dystopian tales to be more satisfying. I could make arguments about it being because of drama and more interesting storytelling, but that's not the real answer. I like these better largely because our imagined utopias are too small.

### We Need a Better Future

Think about *Star Trek* for a minute: The whole premise is built upon the notion that humanity has evolved beyond the interpersonal disputes that currently plague us, including our need to believe in a higher power. It is the idealized secular humanist vision of the future. Earth is the center of galactic politics, and humanity has an important

lesson to share with the more primitive species out amongst the stars, complete with an inspiring and self-righteous monologue—when they are ready, of course (see the Prime Directive).

Now, don't get me wrong: I actually like *Star Trek* (although I think it's at its best when it is self-aware enough to recognize that humans are still broken messes). But despite faster than light travel, technobabble, and intergalactic adventures, *Star Trek's* vision is far too small—all our utopias are. They are the mud pies with which we content ourselves because we are, as C. S. Lewis said, “far too easily pleased.”<sup>87</sup> We need a better vision of the future.

## The Better Future God Promises

The Bible ends with this needed vision—the future where all the universe is actually headed. A future after Christ has returned and the children of God have been revealed, when all of creation will be made new—including us (2 Pet. 3:13). We will have new bodies, glorified as Christ's was, forever free from the effects of sin that plague us today (Rom. 8:22-23; Phil. 3:20-21).

Whenever my wife and I talk about this future with our kids, they have so many questions:

- How old will our redeemed bodies appear?
- Will we experience the passage of time?
- Will we need to sleep?
- How will we spend our time?
- What will our relationships look like?
- Will we need to use the bathroom?

Too often I have to say, “I don't know.” I wish I knew more with certainty, but I don't. Scripture gives many hints of what is to come

but few explicit answers. But we do know it will be a holy world and we will be entirely holy people. We will feast on the finest foods and drinks without shame or fear of overindulgence. We will have renewed and redeemed desires. We will have identities uncompromised by status-seeking and sin. But most importantly, we will live in a real world where we will delight in the presence of Jesus, whom we will see face to face for the first time and who will live with us forever (Luke 22:18; Rev. 21).

This is a world we can hardly imagine, but it's the world we're looking forward to. A world that no human vision of the future can possibly imagine; one that offers more fulfillment than exploring strange new worlds with new civilizations that are more or less the same as ours. It will be the world as God intends it, and so also will we. "When God is finished, we'll be ourselves without the sin—meaning that we'll be the best we can be."<sup>88</sup>

## The Promise That Fuels Our Witness

This promise has been the heart of the Christian witness in the world for two thousand years. This promise allows us to persevere in times of suffering because we *know* there is something greater to come. This promise encourages us to hold the things of this world loosely—power, wealth, reputation—considering even good things as loss compared to the surpassing riches of Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). This promise fuels our desire to share the gospel with everyone we meet because all who turn from their sin will join us there, experiencing the glory of Jesus forever.

I can't imagine how glorious this new world will be, but I do know this: I want everyone I know to share in it. How about you?

# Study and Meditate

Romans 8:22-23; Philippians 3; Revelation 21

## Doctrines to Explore

- Resurrection
- New Heaven and New Earth

## Reflect and Discuss

1. What is the biggest question you have about what the new creation will be like?
2. Why are the words “I don’t know” so important when talking about the new creation?
3. How does the promise of the new creation inspire you to share the gospel with others?

## *Conclusion*

# Further Up and Further In

“Theology” and “joy” are two of my favorite words to put together. That might seem strange to some of you reading this, never expecting to see them paired in a sentence. But it’s true—they *belong* together. Throughout this book, my aim has been to help you see the good news about theology:

- It is not stuffy, academic subject matter but something that cuts to the core of who we are and what we believe.
- As we go “further up and further in[to]”<sup>89</sup> the deep things of God, we see how doctrine leads to and shapes our devotion and delight in God.
- Theology, the application of God’s Word to our lives, draws us closer to Jesus, the One who is our joy. Jesus, the Word who was with God and was God and is God, the One who is the exact expression of God’s nature, the One through whom and for whom the world was made, the One who came into the world to rescue sinful image bearers who denied and rejected Him (John 1:1-3,14-18,29; Heb. 1:3).

Augustine (354-430) understood how theology and joy belong together. The bishop of Hippo spent his youth pursuing empty pleasure and even spent time as a member of a hedonistic cult. He knew well the fruitlessness of seeking joy apart from Christ. But when he discovered the joy of Christ, it transformed his life.

How sweet did it suddenly become to me to be without the sweetness of trifles! And it was now a joy to put away what I formerly feared to lose. For thou didst cast them away from me, O true and highest Sweetness. Thou didst cast them away, and in their place thou didst enter in thyself—sweeter than all pleasure.<sup>90</sup>

Just like Augustine, it took me many years to grasp what the Scriptures put so plainly (Ps. 16:11; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:4). To understand that joy isn't about stuff or spouses or circumstances but about Christ. But once I saw it, it changed everything for me.

And I hope you see this too. That as you set down this book, you see this isn't the end of an exploration of Christian theology but just the beginning. That it will inspire you to continue to pursue a theologically rich joy in Christ, to grow in your delight in Him as you grow in your knowledge of Him, and to live in light of these truths that shape our faith.

Because that's what sound theology does.

It gives us joy—the joy we've been looking for all our lives. The joy only delighting in Jesus offers.

# Endnotes

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011) [eBook].
2. C. S. Lewis, "Introduction," in *St. Athanasius On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944), 8.
3. J. A. Medders and Brandon D. Smith, *Rooted: Theology for Growing Christians* (Rainer Publishing, 2016), 22.
4. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 76.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 206.
6. I loved my GoBots, which was a rip-off of Transformers.
7. Whether we realize this or not is an entirely different conversation.
8. <http://hubblesite.org/image/3760/gallery>.
9. This is what you're likely to see in the writings of scholars such as the late Marcus Borg and Peter Enns, as well as pop-philosophers such as Brian McLaren and Rob Bell.
10. Which is what you'd find expressed by leaders in many mainline denominations and self-identified progressive fellowships.
11. You'd also find many progressive Christians and mainline denominations taking this approach.
12. Focusing on the New Testament writings alone, roughly 5,800 Greek manuscripts exist (most of which are recognizable fragments), the oldest of which were copied within thirty to fifty years of the original writing. For the sake of comparison, only 10 copies of Caesar's *Gaellic Wars* exist, the earliest of which dates to one thousand years after the original was written. Biblical scholars have found widespread agreement in language between the available manuscript fragments and later copies, and where disagreement in language exists (about one percent of all errors and inconsistencies that cannot otherwise be accounted for), it is not connected to any major doctrine of the faith. The earliest lists of the New Testament books include virtually every one we have in our Bible, with only seven being questioned at different times before the Council of Carthage formally recognized the canon in AD 397. Since then, the canon of Scripture has remained unchanged, despite periodic debates from the sixteenth century onward.
13. Walt Kelly, in the comic strip "Pogo", April 22, 1971.

14. *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Article XII.
15. Much of this chapter is adapted from my book *Contend: Defending the Faith in a Fallen World* (Cruciform Press, 2012).
16. “Script” is the right word for it, as Jehovah’s Witness missionaries use handbooks such as *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, which give guidance on how to answer almost every possible objection and point of resistance.
17. This doesn’t, however, mean Christians and Muslims believe in the same God (nor modern Jews for that matter). Despite the earliest Christians and Jesus Himself having been born Jews, modern Judaism and historic Islam deny the deity of Jesus and, in so doing, reject God’s revelation of Himself as three in one. To reject God’s nature is a rejection of God.
18. Which many a prophet did, such as Elijah during his challenge to the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18 and Isaiah in Isaiah 44:9-20.
19. One theologian goes as far as to say that Trinitarian theology explicitly began in the Old Testament era, with ancient Jewish theology having embraced an understanding of two Yahweh figures. “But once this teaching came to involve the risen Jesus of Nazareth, Judaism could no longer tolerate it” (Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* [Lexham Press, 2015], 148).
20. For example, Oneness Pentecostal churches.
21. For example, *The Shack*, in which “Papa” spoke this to Mack: “When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood” (William P. Young, *The Shack* [Windblown Media, 2007], 99).
22. For example, “St. Patrick’s Bad Analogies” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>).
23. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God* (Crossway, 2010), 212.
24. The formal term is *omniscience*.
25. Or, in a word, *omnipresent*.
26. The theological term is *omnipotent*.
27. This is the belief that life developed through a process of ongoing, incremental changes and mutations successfully occurring over a long period of time, all governed by chance. It necessarily rejects the concept of the supernatural.
28. Despite evidence to the contrary (i.e., social media).
29. Moral relativism is a philosophy that believes objective standards of right and wrong do not exist. In this view, standards of right and wrong, or good and evil, are best understood as social constructs determined by our cultural or historical period.
30. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 16.

31. An option which gives the father of lies too much credit, since he is hardly God's equal.
32. A view held by many Christian theologians stating that for those who are capable of making meaningful moral choices, the possibility of doing evil always exists.
33. Martin Luther, in *Martin Luther's Table Talk: Abridged from Luther's Works, Volume 54*, ed. Henry F. French (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 5.
34. The theological term is *immanence* (see chapter 4).
35. Jared C. Wilson, *The Wonder-Working God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 29.
36. The odds of which have been said to be approximately 3,720 to 1, according to a certain high-strung golden robot. The odds of life emerging on its own are somewhere in the neighborhood of 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 to 1 (see "The Probability of Life," by Richard Peacock, *Evolution: Frequently Asked Questions*, December 31, 2017, <http://evolutionfaq.com/articles/probability-life/>). So if it seems to be a logical fallacy to compare fictional and real data points, just remember: forty zeroes may well be fictional too.
37. John Newton, in *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1839), 272.
38. Just for the record, listing is not my way of offering approval or endorsement.
39. Again, TV has destroyed me. In this case, cream cheese commercials.
40. You might run across someone who believes Matthew 22:30 teaches that we do indeed become angels. But Jesus is speaking of the end of marriage in the new creation, since it is intended as a symbol of the bond between Christ and His bride, the Church, which will be on full display at that time.
41. Some Christians believe there are guardian angels, based on passages such as Matthew 18:10 and Acts 12.
42. The Greek word for "evangelism" shares a root word with "angel"—*evangel*, meaning "good news" or "good message." When used in this sense, the meaning of an angel may extend beyond supernatural beings to human representatives or messengers (see Rev. 2–3).
43. And they're not alone. See "Goblins and Ghosts and Things That Go Bump in the Night," [pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org), September 17, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2009/10/27/goblins-and-ghosts-and-things-that-go-bump-in-the-night/>.
44. We'll get there in chapter 28, "The Question Everyone's Asking."
45. Also known as antichrists (see 1 John 2).
46. Dustin Kensrue, "This Is War."
47. See *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn*.
48. You knew this would happen.

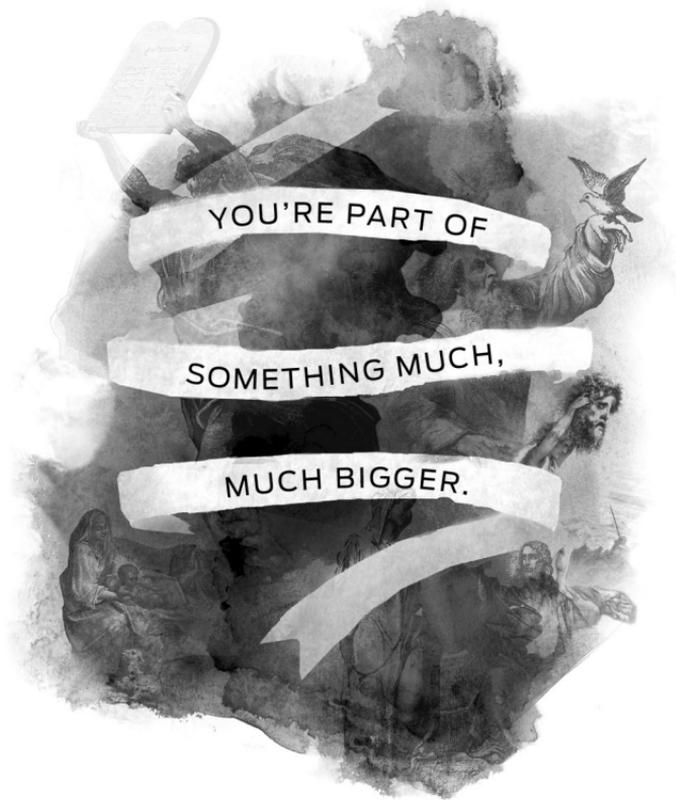
49. Which it would be if it weren't about a rich guy.
50. A poor decision is choosing fish over steak at a wedding. Or choosing fish in general. But then, I don't really care for fish.
51. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975.
52. See "Jacob and Esau," by C. H. Spurgeon, in *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 5 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1894), 120.
53. Most commonly, God withheld rain as He did during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 17:1).
54. I win, by the way.
55. Unitarian Universalism is a movement born out of rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and therefore can in no meaningful way be called "Christian," liberal or otherwise.
56. "The Hitchens Transcript," *Portland Monthly*, January 1, 2018, <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/articles/2009/12/17/christopher-hitchens>.
57. Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, "In Christ Alone."
58. Theologians refer to this as the *hypostatic union*, a term that means that Jesus is both fully God and fully human—two natures existing simultaneously in one being.
59. And still haven't.
60. Again, still haven't.
61. A conflict that exists among many believers to this day.
62. A study of American theological views by LifeWay Research indicates that 56 percent of Americans believe the Holy Spirit is a force rather than a personal being. See "Americans Love God and the Bible, Are Fuzzy on the Details," LifeWay Research, September 27, 2016, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/>.
63. See chapter 5.
64. The theological term for this work is *illumination* (see chapter 3).
65. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 54.
66. J. D. Greear, *Jesus, Continued...* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) [eBook].
67. Not a typo.
68. Such a belief has rarely been taken seriously as it is obvious heresy. Charles Spurgeon, a nineteenth-century Baptist preacher, passionately opposed a group of false teachers promoting this view during his day. This was one of the only occurrences of this belief appearing in the entirety of church history.
69. This story has been shared in multiple forms. This retelling is adapted from *The God Who Is There*, by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 131.
70. After all, a better version of me is still just a pathetic version of me.

71. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1987), 57.
72. Islam, modern Judaism, Bahá'í, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses would all hold to views resembling this to varying degrees.
73. The technical term for this is *imputation*.
74. Theologians often use the phrase *already/not yet* to describe this relationship.
75. Justin S. Holcomb, *On the Grace of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 94.
76. Generally speaking, secondary doctrines are beliefs which, while important, are not essential for salvation. These tend to be the beliefs that distinguish between orthodox Christian denominations, such as views of mode and timing of baptism and leadership structure.
77. By God's kingdom in this context, I'm referring to His reign over all creation.
78. Exactly what "sacrificial" means is a matter of friendly debate among Christians.
79. Maureen Shaw, "The Sexist and Racist History of Marriage That No One Talks About," *Teen Vogue*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/marriage-racist-sexist-history>.
80. Susan Dominus, "Is an Open Marriage a Happier Marriage?" *The New York Times Magazine*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/11/magazine/is-an-open-marriage-a-happier-marriage.html>.
81. This sort of leadership is not arrogant or boastful, nor does it demand its own way (1 Cor. 13:4-5). It is not chauvinism, which is antithetical to Christianity in general and Christian marriage in particular. It is leadership that echoes Paul's call to follow him as he follows Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).
82. This statement should not be read as suggesting that women should not work outside the home, an issue of personal conviction that differs in each family situation. Nor does it imply that women are to stay silent if abuse occurs; rather, they should seek immediate help both from civil authorities and from their local church, and they should give it.
83. Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 42-43.
84. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, by J. I. Packer (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), *Evangelism*, by J. Mack Stiles (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*, by Mark Dever (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), and *Sharing Jesus Without Freaking Out*, by Alvin L. Reid (Nashville: B&H, 2017) being a few of my favorites.
85. For an in-depth treatment of this subject, read *Counterfeit Gospels* by Trevin Wax (Chicago: Moody, 2011).
86. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, vol. 2 (London: William Hunt and Company, 1856), 404.

87. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 26.
88. Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 280.
89. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 206.
90. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 162.

# About the Author

Aaron Armstrong is the Brand Manager of *The Gospel Project*. He is also the author of several books, including *Awaiting a Savior: The Gospel, the New Creation, and the End of Poverty*, and the screenwriter for the award-winning documentary, *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer*. Originally from Canada, Aaron lives outside of Nashville, Tennessee with his wife and three children.



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#### AUTHOR

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