

BEFORE CHRIST



By Pastor Glenn Parkinson



God

Bible

World

Jesus

Faith



God



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BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This first study starts at the very beginning, exploring whether it is reasonable to believe God exists.

... what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made... *Romans 1:19-20*

Christian faith explores truths as vast as the universe and as deep as the human soul, resting everything on the single most influential man who ever lived: Jesus Christ. The journey to find him is the most significant trek a person can make. Where to start? For some, the journey begins with the question of God's very existence. I know, because that is where mine began. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you so profound, and so intimate, a thing.

If the reality of God seems self-evident, this booklet will be of minimal interest to you and you may want to just move on to the next one in the series. But if the reality of God is not obvious, I will offer some thoughts about the biblical assertion at the top of this page, that God's existence can be "clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." We'll look at two general categories of observation: what we perceive in the universe at large, and what we perceive within ourselves.

Order in the Universe

Virtually every observation a person can make of the natural world around us, from the most meticulous to the most casual, reveals astounding order. Complex but discernible structure marks everything from galactic swirls to extreme sports to silicon computing chips.

Order is most breathtakingly evident in the phenomenon of life. Study of the DNA molecule reveals a truly astounding storehouse of information and design. Each DNA molecule defines the physical characteristics of our individual body with a genetic code three *billion* characters long! Just reading the code within one cell at a rate of three characters a second would take 31 years, reading day and night.

The sciences quantify observations about life with impressive numbers, or encapsulate them in beautiful models. But it only takes an ear to discover the summer ecosystem in the back yard, or an eye to appreciate the vastness of the night sky.

Sages of old mused that it would be as ludicrous to deny the existence of an intelligent Creator as it would be to find a pocket watch lying in the woods and then deny the existence of a watchmaker. If a watch could not “just happen” by itself, how could life? How could the entire orderly universe?

Today it is not so fashionable to speak of divine watchmakers. Today the fashion is rather to speak of natural (random chance based) evolution. Evidence does argue for a universe appreciably older than suspected by our forefathers. And it certainly looks like life on Earth has appeared in stages of increasing complexity (something presumed in the first chapter of Genesis). But why assume that this is the result of random chance rather than intelligence? When we look back at the history of computing, for example, from punch cards to modern touchscreens, we assume that a great deal of intelligent thought caused its evolution, not random chance.

But an artificial polarization of science and religion screams that the increasing complexity of life has to be a result of blind chance—intelligent design is disallowed as unscientific. The mantra is that order occurs entirely by random chance mutations, with the most efficient mutation surviving. That is, minute and improbable accidents accumulate over time, with natural selection causing these accidents to piggyback on one another in just the right way so as to eventually produce amino acids, cells, moss,

insects, whales and eventually humans. Since that “explains” the universe in terms of blind chance, it is claimed that there is no compelling evidence of God to find.

But does that even make sense?

The theory of evolution has accumulated a large body of data to support its assertions concerning the age of the universe and the progression of life from simple to complex. But the notion that complexity arises from random chance is also asserted as equally scientific, and that is not true. In fact, the notion of extreme complexity arising out of chance is nonsense. It becomes the preferred choice only when the alternative, intelligent design, is arbitrarily disqualified as “unprovable” (regardless of how well it fits the observable facts).

There are branches of mathematics and physics devoted to the study of chance and the probabilities of random events in the real world. One of the fundamental conclusions of these studies is that things do not randomly tend to order themselves. Instead, things predictably tend to disorder themselves. (Which is more likely to happen in response to a light breeze: a house of cards falling down in a scrambled heap, or a scattered heap of cards spontaneously arranging themselves in a fragile structure?)

Most people, of course, do not make a scientific study of order and chaos. Evolutionists typically distract us from questioning the theory’s dependence on random events by touting the immensely long time since the universe began—several billion years. We all know enough about probability to know that an unlikely, but possible, event is more likely to occur as the amount of time increases. Billions of years sounds like a very long time, indeed. Outside of the sciences, people do not use “billion” to describe anything concrete except government spending, so the number seems overwhelming. “Yes,” we think, “an accumulation of positive accidents is unlikely, but surely anything could spontaneously spring out of a universe so unthinkably old!”

The logic that drives confidence in evolution-by-chance is reflected in a well known statement commonly attributed to

Thomas Huxley. He said that if a million monkeys were permitted to strike the keys of a million typewriters for a million years, they might very well by chance duplicate a Shakespearean play. Admittedly, human life is astronomically more complex than the proposed achievement of the monkeys, but the example serves to assert a principle: billions of years is enough time for anything to happen, no matter how unlikely. The argument sounds very convincing.

Huxley might have been embarrassed to know that a simple thought experiment can put his argument to the test. Let's simplify things a bit (giving the monkeys a break), and actually calculate the time required for even such a simple example of "random order." Suppose our budding authors have typewriters with only capital letters, seven punctuation marks and a space key. We allow them to type twenty-four hours a day at the speed of twelve and a half keys per second. Instead of a Shakespearean play, the experiment only requires them to type the first verse of Genesis in English—not much of a challenge compared to the human nervous system, but Huxley was, after all, only trying to make a point. To demonstrate just what point the monkeys actually make, let me quote a biologist who applied some basic probability theory...

"The length of time it would take is indeed quite beyond our comprehension but an illustration may help. Think of a large mountain which is solid rock. Once a year a bird comes and rubs its beak on the mountain, wearing away an amount equivalent to the finest grain of sand (about .0025 inch in diameter). At this rate of erosion the mountain would disappear very slowly, but when completely gone the monkeys would still be just warming up.

"Think of a rock not the size of a mountain but a rock larger than the whole earth, larger than the whole solar system. Try to think of a rock so large that if the earth were at its center its surface would touch the nearest star. This star is so far away that light coming from it takes

more than four years to get here, traveling 186,000 miles every second. If a bird came once every thousand years and removed an amount equivalent to the smallest grain of sand, more than four hundred such rocks would be worn away before our champion super simians would be expected to type Genesis 1:1. If single spaced on one side of a page, the paper used in this typing would make a mass so large that something moving at the speed of light would take as long to penetrate it as all the time the geology books allow since the fossil record began.”¹

This illustration is beyond my power to verify. But I do know that the numbers involved are incomprehensibly huge. Compared to the time necessary to randomly type the fifty-five characters of Genesis 1 in order, the 14 billion year age of the universe is insignificant. The point is that the time required to randomly order life, such as the three billion unit sequence of a DNA molecule, is quite unimaginable. It could not reasonably happen in a universe only a few billion years old.

Chance-based evolution is a form of blind faith, crossing the line from science into irrational bias. It’s true that the concept of an intelligent Creator raises many more questions. But even so, intelligence is a far better candidate than random chance to explain the universe we actually see.

Let me move on from what we observe “out there” to something more intimate: what we observe within ourselves, within our own conscious being ...

The Person Inside of Me

The reality of God was the last thing on my mind at 2 AM in the Computer Science building at the University of Maryland. A freshman in 1969, I was working on a computer programming assignment due the next day.

The first year of college is a big deal for anyone, but for me it meant pursuing a quest already a decade old. Since childhood I had

an unquenchable thirst for meaning. How did the universe come to be? What was life all about? I yearned to understand the grand design behind all things.

Although these are traditionally religious questions, I had no interest in religion. To me, religion was nothing more than subjective superstition, not to be taken seriously. It might have its social uses, but it had nothing to do with the substance of reality. Since divinity was supposed to be outside of the material universe, “God” was not part of anything I considered to be real. All that existed was matter and energy in a completely closed system. No room for God there. No, I was certain that the answers to my questions were to be found in the sciences, not in faith.

Science had an almost mystical air about it when I was a kid growing up in the ‘50’s. In those days, technology was the intellectually acceptable stage for any serious dialog about life. *Mr. Wizard* was my affectionate model of a wise mentor. Even in fiction, TV shows like *Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits* dealt with metaphysical concepts costumed as science, not religion or philosophy. I have particularly vivid memories of the 1964 World’s Fair in New York, an audio-visual showcase for science that left a powerful impression. Exalting mankind’s scientific potential to epic proportions, it promised a technological answer to every significant question.

Science was the way to find objective beauty, order and meaning. That is why I read every book on physical science in the Annapolis Public Library. When my parents casually asked me while driving one evening what I wanted to be when I grew up, I announced from the back seat, “I want to be a theoretical physicist majoring in quantum dynamics.” Quite a mouthful for a ten year old in 1960.

I finally made it to college in the pursuit of my dream, where I eventually earned a Phi Beta Kappa degree in physics. It was there, too, as a freshman that I experienced my first love affair—with computers. To think of all the secrets, all the meaning that could be uncovered with computers! Those were the days before terminals,

of course. Interaction was limited to keypunch machines and the card stacks they generated. But any access to those wonders of technology was amazing.

That love affair was strained, however, as I sat there at 2 AM striving to exterminate the last bugs from a frustrating assignment. As my eyes scanned the latest printout, I noticed that someone had tinkered with the computer's operating system. Instead of reporting standard error messages, it dished out mild abuse: "Stupid!", "Try again," that sort of thing. I had stumbled on the work of one of the very first hackers!

I found the practical joke amusing and toyed absent-mindedly with how to imitate such mischief if given the chance. All I would have to do is locate the memory locations of the error messages. Then it would be a simple matter to replace ...

... my thinking stopped dead in its tracks

If you have ever found a picture in a mass of ink blots or witnessed familiar forms appearing in clouds, you know how I felt at that moment. An insight unexpectedly materialized from nowhere—an insight that rocked my foundations and brought down everything I believed into ruin. In retrospect, I cannot explain why this truth never hit me before, but that night it hit me hard.

What I realized was that the computer didn't mean what it said. It called me "stupid" instead of informing me that a variable had been undeclared, but it didn't really think me stupid. It was merely executing a subroutine that responded to errors by taking whatever was stored in a given memory location and printing it out on piece of paper. Anything stored in that location would be printed: "Undeclared variable", "stupid", "Error #1583", "#@*^&+", "To be, or not to be" ... anything. The computer didn't mean anything by what it printed.

Some *person* meant something. The original programmer intended to give a clue to assist in debugging, and the more recent hacker intended to give a chuckle. But the computer itself was just a closed system of mere matter and energy. As such, its every

action was completely determined in a mechanistic way. It was incapable of intending or meaning anything.

My mind had conceived of the whole universe as a closed system of only matter and energy—a super machine, if you will—like the university’s computer, only larger. I thought myself part of that system, a biochemical cog in the big machine.

But at that moment, the simple realization dawned on me that if my assumptions about reality were true, then the idea of “meaning” was meaningless, an illusion with no real substance. There was no *person* to give meaning, only matter and energy in a closed system. No person to give meaning to *anything*. Therefore, no person inside my own head to give meaning to my thoughts.

If my previous assumptions were true, then my mind was running its program as mechanistically as the university’s computer. The Univac 1108 didn’t know proper debugging from a practical joke. If my thoughts at that moment were nothing more than a memory dump of selected brain cells, how could I know that they made any sense? How could I know whether my electrical and neural patterns produced rational thoughts? How could I even know what *rational* means? Whether my thoughts reflected a true or false equation, affection or hatred, poetry or gibberish—whatever they were, they could have no more meaning than the college computer’s mindless comment that I was stupid.

What difference can it make whether a human-shaped computer spits out “I love you” or “Lynch him!” or “gorphmxtyql”? There is absolutely no objective meaning, purpose or value in the bare existence of matter and energy. A machine can process data, but it cannot create any true, objective meaning out of its data.

Significance, purpose, meaning—these are ideas associated with *persons*, not machines. There is no place for a soul in a machine. Those who say there is have actually given up on the notion of personhood, and with it any hope of objective meaning and significance.

Machines cannot create real meaning because they are completely controlled by physical forces which, while they may be consistent, have no *intrinsic* purpose. Random interactions of these forces in larger and larger systems increase complexity, but gain no purpose. Purpose has to be given to machines by a person. A giant supercomputer may work on projects of great importance, but the importance of its work is defined by its human programmers. If the programmers went away and never came back, the supercomputer would lose all significance, even if it continued to rerun the same programs until it melted down. Machines mean nothing without the “why” supplied by a person.

To be sure, the idea of a soul creates its own massive set of questions and problems, as complex and mysterious as any in physics or astronomy. But at least persons can *have* meaningful questions and seek meaningful answers. Machines cannot. Unless there is a person inside of me to give the “why” to my actions and define my purpose, none of my thoughts and actions can have any meaning whatsoever.

You see what a bombshell had exploded in my face. That night, I unexpectedly realized that in a world based on my thoroughly mechanistic presuppositions, there was no room for real persons. Not one. Not even me. And if there is no room for persons, there is no room for meaning, and hence, for reason. Without persons, nothing can really make any sense at all, because the ability to create “sense” would not exist. A denial of personhood implies that reason is only an illusion.

There was a moment in which I wanted to resist, to retain my conviction that biological machines can create meaning. But that cannot be done. C. S. Lewis quoted a summary of the problem: “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true ... and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”² Asserting that “natural laws” are *all* that exist is an assertion that undercuts any possibility of rational thought. Therefore, it is nonsense. It is an assertion that cannot

even be discussed without assuming it is wrong. I realized there could be no turning back once I saw this.

Do not suppose that this discovery was accompanied by some kind of religious joy. It was not. All that happened was that my search from meaning broadened from traditional scientific exploration. My atheistically “scientific” worldview was not as scientific as I thought! It had doggedly maintained assumptions which could not account for the most fundamental observation I could make . . . me!

Now I had to find an adequate cause for personhood— souls, if you will. A machine may build a machine, but a machine cannot build a person. Years later, I heard an analogy by Dr. Francis Schaeffer that described this simple truth. He pictured three mountain ranges with two valleys separating them. Imagine, he said, that one valley is filled halfway up the slopes with water. As you watch, you see water begin to fill the other valley. If the water in the second valley stops rising at the height of the water in the first valley, then you would suspect that a channel connects the two, and that the first body of water is the source, or cause, of the second. But if the water in the second valley rises higher than the water level in the first, you would discount the possibility of a connecting channel. In that case, the first valley could not possibly provide an adequate source for the other valley’s water.

Every effect needs a sufficient cause. If humanity is more than a random accident, if real persons do exist, then there must be an adequate *personal* cause. The water level of personhood is considerably higher than the water level of biological machinery. What is the source for personhood? There must be a Person behind all persons like myself.³

This was not fun. I now had more questions than ever. What kind of a Person is this God? How can I know God? Is God good? How can someone all-powerful allow the mess of pain and evil that infects this planet?

Nevertheless, what I observe inside myself builds on what I observe in the outside world. Life demonstrates a powerful,

intelligent Cause, while my own existence clearly demonstrates that this Cause is a Person—someone we call God.

Now I had to deal with that.

Suppressing the Truth

Perhaps, like me, you have been used to brushing off the concept of God as one of the world's superstitions. Perhaps you believe God is only a concept created by people who emotionally need such a foundation. But emotional need (however real) has nothing to do with it. If there is no God, then nothing can ultimately *matter*, nothing at all. Intellectually, I must either recognize the existence of a personal God or resign myself to a world that cannot make sense, where life is an accident with no objective meaning and no living future.

The thing is, that's not really a choice—for two reasons: First, I cannot rationally choose something that negates reason. Second (and this one's the kicker), it is simply impossible to actually live that way. I have to assume some purpose, significance and values for absolutely every choice I make. One may claim that there is no God, all the while buying milk and getting the car fixed and writing Congressmen about environmental problems. But without God, why would any of those things matter? Without the Person of God to give the world (and me) meaning, I do not need milk to stay alive, or a car to keep a job, or a Congressman to worry about an environment that has no more significance than I do.

I began to realize that being involved in the business of living proved that I did not really believe the atheistic philosophy I affirmed. I could propose the intellectual fiction of a mechanistic universe, but I could never approach actually living that way because the act of living assumes that life has purpose. I might live in anguish, not knowing what that purpose is, but I inherently know that I exist for *some* reason.

We all do. Even the existentialist who grieves over the absurdity of life does so with a passion and eloquence that demonstrates the true humanity he or she denies. We can't escape

it. Even suicide is a purposeful act betraying a person's confidence that he or she can do something meaningful. Even the act of passionately denying God's existence assumes a capacity for meaning that *demand*s his existence.

This comes as quite a shock to atheists such as I was. Atheists deny God's existence and therefore reject any ground for objective meaning in the universe. But I now realized that I had been fooling myself, since I had never lived that way and never would.

But *why* did I go to such lengths to fool myself? Did I really think that God did not exist, or was I simply afraid of how inconvenient he might be? After all, God's existence certainly raises a lot of difficult and potentially inconvenient questions.

I made the startling discovery that my atheism was not, at root, an intellectual issue. It was a moral one, having more to do with my integrity. That night in the Computer Science Center, I began a journey that exposed my atheism as simple prejudice. But *why* was I so prejudiced against God?

Let me go back to the Bible passage I quoted at the beginning, this time drawing attention to its context ...

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. *Romans 1:18-20*

It's true. God's existence is, indeed, perfectly obvious in his creation, whether I look at the world around me or the person inside of me. The reason I could not see that for so long was that I did not want to see it. I suppressed the truth, unconsciously, but firmly. The existence of God complicates a life that wishes to be independent, and I feared that complication. I internally denied that

truth so effectively that I had convinced myself that my atheism was rational.

But no matter how much I wanted the independence of atheism, I could never live as though my thoughts were the purposeless product of random atomic collisions. I could play with such thoughts, but I could never truly believe them—my life proves it. All our lives prove it. We cannot escape the truth that God is real; all we can do is suppress it.

In summary, we perceive an overwhelming order around us and have an innate sense of personhood within us that cannot be accounted for without an intelligent and personal Creator God. Either we deny God and deny what we see, or we affirm what we see and affirm God.

As I said earlier, this is not fun. Recognizing the existence of God creates a host of unwanted questions, for now comes the uncomfortable thought that I must deal with this God. Why have I suppressed the obvious truth of his being? Is there something wrong with God? Is there something wrong with me?

Even more disturbing, why is the world such a mess? If God can be known through what he has made, then what does this broken and hurting planet say about him? Is God the Devil?

And if God is a Person, why do I not know him? Why don't we communicate? Why hasn't God spoken? Or has he?

Good questions! But they are good questions only because a personal God *does* exist. And since he is real, then there are real answers that I may be able to find ...

The next pamphlet in this series is entitled "Bible," and explores the concept of divine revelation as a source of reliable knowledge.

(Endnotes)

- 1 This illustration is from Dr. Bolton Davidheiser, former Professor of Biology at Westmont and Biola Colleges. He took his mathematics from *An Introduction to Probability Theory and Its Implications*, by William Feller, New York: Wiley, 1950, I, p. 226.
- 2 *Miracles*, by C. S. Lewis, the MacMillan Company, 1947, p. 22.
- 3 It would be most accurate to say that God must at least be a person. That is to say, the highest way I can relate to God is the level of my own personhood—my thinking and feeling and acting. God must be able to relate to me on this level because he made me. However, he surely has attributes quite beyond mine and my power to comprehend. That is not a problem. I need not know God as well as he knows himself, as long as I know him as well as I can.



BIBLE



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This second study assumes the existence of God and explores why it makes sense to study the Bible for truth about him.

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.
When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy
went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

Matthew 13:44

“What is truth?” Pilate asked.

John 18:38

Truth. What is it? Is it a treasure to be sought and found, waiting to be discovered? Or is truth ultimately unknowable?

Our postmodern society has all but despaired of being able to know truth. Especially in the West, our hard-won political tolerance has been thoroughly confused with the nature of truth. We think that because the State should not enforce an idea on everyone, then there cannot actually be truths that are objectively right and wrong.

One exception is mathematics. Most people still believe that $1+1=2$ always and for everyone. Therefore, there is no practical need for the State to protect individual opinions about math. Most would agree that sciences based on mathematics still deal with “truth.” In fact, differences of scientific opinion are tolerated because of a general belief that there is a real truth out there to be found. It is only when we move beyond such science that the State protects a broad freedom to think and worship as we wish. In the U.S., we forbid the State establishment of any religion. This is a very good thing.

It does not follow, however, that political freedom to believe and worship as we wish necessarily implies that there is no objective religious truth out there. Perhaps there is no truth to find. But perhaps there is. As important as they are for society, our political freedoms have nothing to do with it.

And yet, there is a growing insistence that truths about God are unknowable. After all, we are told, we each see things according to our individual and unique point of view. Since perceptions are relative to each person, we can never find something that is true for everyone, everywhere.

How ironic that this notion was inadvertently promoted by the most significant scientific discovery of modern times. Einstein's theories gave the word *relativity* tremendous weight. They were seized upon by popular culture to "prove" that every truth is relative to the person considering it. "That may be true for you, but not for me" is now a commonplace response in every context.

But is that what Einstein's theories demonstrate?

$E=mc^2$

The idea that a person's position or situation affects his perception of reality did not begin with Einstein. People realized long ago that if you move north at 5 miles an hour, a southbound traveler moving toward you at the same speed would, from your point of view, appear to approach at 10 miles per hour. This observation can, indeed, be applied with some success to matters of culture. Where we are and where we are going does, indeed, influence our perception of reality in many different ways.

But what Einstein mathematically demonstrated was that in relative motions approaching the speed of light, the most bizarre perceptions are possible—objects flatten and grow more massive, while time slows down. Since Einstein, modern men and women have found it fashionable to conclude that *any* notion about *anything*, however bizarre, may be acceptable on the basis of relativity. "Anything is possible."

This is unfortunate because the theory of relativity could just as well have been named the theory of *absolutivity*. Einstein's brilliant discoveries rest upon the unexpected, unexplainable, amazing but repeatedly observable fact that the speed of light remains constant regardless of the relative situation of the observer.

That is, it doesn't matter how fast you are going relative to a beam of light—toward it, away from it, sideways to it—you will always measure it as exactly 299,792 km/sec. The speed of light is a constant around which all our observations must adapt and bend, an unmovable anchor of reference for all perceptions. The bizarre effects predicted at huge speeds happen only because the speed of light will not budge. It is an absolute fact to be discovered, not at all dependent on an observer's relative point of view.

Granted that many matters of personal and cultural taste are relative to the individual or society, but may there not be fundamental realities which are objectively true—absolutes which will not budge, forcing everything else to adapt and bend around it? Such truths, if they exist, would certainly go to the root of existence and human meaning. If they exist, they would describe God.

Consider how we learn the things we believe are really true. One way is to use careful observation and logical reasoning (like Einstein). That is, after all, how the speed of light was discovered to be an unerring constant. I have elsewhere noted that careful observation and logical reasoning demonstrates not only that the Creator God exists, but also that he is a Person.¹

But observation and reasoning will only take us so far when we are dealing with persons, even the Person of God. A person's inner thoughts and purposes are not the sort of truths that science is designed to discover. That is not to say that the pursuit of God must be irrational, but simply that science is not the only rational path that will give answers. The scientific method is designed to answer questions of the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* variety. It is not equipped to answer *why* to anything. This is not some fault of science. If we want to know why a person does something, we must do more than observe. We must communicate.

In fact, communication is how we learn the vast bulk of everything we know and believe. This is true not only regarding the *why* questions, but also the *who*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* matters that have been observed not by us, but by others who then

tell us what they experienced.

So, why can't we reliably learn about God by him communicating with us, and from others with whom he has communicated?

Exodus 3

Moses could barely get the words out. At the best of times he stuttered. In all his youth as an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he had never mastered the art of public speaking. And forty years as an outcast shepherd on the far side of nowhere had done nothing for his public presence.

But what training or natural poise could have prepared him for this? He had been attracted by the sight of a bush up on the mountain that burned ... and burned and burned. Hours went by and the bush kept burning, as if its source of energy were inexhaustible. Eventually, sheer curiosity forced him to make the climb.

When he approached the bush, a voice spoke that changed his life forever. Even if the voice had not told him to remove his sandals out of respect, he would have still sensed that the place was holy. You can wonder whether you hear the voice of God in the wind or in your dreams, but when he actually speaks, there is no mistaking who it is.

God had just told Moses to return to Egypt to rescue the Hebrew people from harsh slavery. It was part of a larger plan. Moses was tasked to represent God both to the Hebrews and to Pharaoh. The shepherd's doubt of his own abilities had been waved aside by the mighty divine arm which would accomplish all that needed to be done.

A thousand questions pushed and shoved for attention, but only one made its way to Moses' stammering lips, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

Moses needed to know who this God is, who claimed all his life and obedience. He remembered stories of Abraham from his childhood, but there was so much more, so many questions—questions he might be expected to answer as God’s spokesman. It was a long standing Hebrew tradition to encapsulate a person’s qualities in his name, so that was the question he blurted out.

I AM WHO I AM.

What? What did God say?

This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”

So that is his name! I AM WHO I AM ...

How the Bible is Unique

Moses was the first author of the Bible. The encounter he described with God (recorded in Chapters 3-4 of Exodus) sets the tone for all that is to follow and makes biblical religion unique among all the religions of the world.

All other scriptures of the world’s major religions embody the accumulated philosophies of various cultures and peoples. The Tripitika of Buddhism retains the core of Siddhartha Gautama’s personal philosophy along with the rules, sermons and doctrines added by many followers over time. Buddha, himself, pointed not to truth per se, but rather to a path which he hoped would guide each seeker. The Vedas, Bhagavad-Gita and related writings record the foundational stories and teachings behind the cultural polytheism which is Hinduism. Simpler religions rely on oral traditions instead of writing to pass along the basic philosophy common to that people.

The modern mind prefers to speak of “ideologies” (humanism, existentialism, etc.) rather than religion. But all these paths share a common nature: each represents a different philosophical perspective, a different attempt by men and women to answer the questions of meaning as best they can. They claim to be nothing else. None of them rest universal claims on historical fact.

The Bible, however, claims to be quite different. The God who spoke to Moses introduced himself as a God of *revelation*. I AM WHO I AM is not a say-nothing joke; it is a direct answer to the question Moses was trying to ask. Moses would come to know who God is, as God revealed himself to Moses. God's name proclaimed that he is not defined by what Moses (or anyone else) conceives him to be. He is not who Moses may think he is. He is not defined by any human being's philosophy. *He is who he is*—objectively real, and not a composite of human imaginings. The only way we can reliably know God is for him to tell us who he is.

Moses was being called to act as God's instrument in history, and it would be in human history that God would reveal truth about himself. Creation stories and accumulated cultural wisdom are one thing. A record of historical intervention is another. The God who spoke to Moses said that he would reveal himself in a way that only God could, not in philosophical propositions and moral proverbs alone, but by molding the history of a specific people chosen for that purpose.

After Moses had seen God perform the saving miracle of the exodus, he wrote:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testiness, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other.

Deuteronomy 4:32-35

This is the theme of the entire Bible: God revealing himself in history. Only God can shape human events as a potter shapes clay. The history of Israel that culminated in Jesus Christ became a canvas upon which God painted who he is, the reason we are alienated from him, and what he has done to overcome the alienation. By detailing God's special intervention in history, the Bible records a God who exists independently of the prophet, a God who is who he is and who makes himself known through revelation.

Earlier I pointed out that when it comes to learning, communication is a valid alternative to scientific method. A fancy word for communication is "revelation". The word may call to mind transcendental trances and ecstatic experiences, but the word does not mean that at all. Revelation is nothing more than someone telling you something true that you don't already know.

Except for a few fun experiments in school, virtually all the scientific knowledge most people possess is based on human revelation—what someone has told them. You probably believe the theory of relativity, but why? Did you perform an experiment to prove it? Probably not; you trusted your teacher. The same is true for history. The same is true for just about everything. We trust parents and teachers to tell us the truth. We trust Mom to teach us the alphabet correctly, Dad to properly explain how the garden hose works and Mr. Ferguson to give us the real low-down on physics (teaching us to trust in experiments not even he has performed). Most of what we know about our friends and family comes from what they reveal, or tell us, of their thoughts and personal history. Revelation, or communication, is not the exception for learning; it is the rule.

Of course, human revelation is only as reliable as the one doing the revealing. People can lie, be prejudiced or misinformed. Generally speaking, however, the process is quite effective, and it is most certainly rational. Civilization is built upon learning from others who learned from others who learned from others ... something that someone once experienced.

God, too, can reliably reveal his thoughts by telling us who he is—and while he is at it, who we are or are supposed to be. The crucial requirement is that we have a reliable source, a good reason to believe that the information is, in fact, from God. The self-generated wisdom of philosophers and sages may indeed be wise, but it is not enough. What we need is not what someone thinks God is, but rather who God says he is.

This is why the Bible is unique: it actually claims to be from God, and it rests that claim upon history, not philosophy. If Isaiah did not predict the Babylonian exile or if Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then the Bible would fail its own test for true revelation.² If historical foretelling and objective miracles did not happen, then Isaiah, Jesus and the others were either deluded or deceptive. That is why criticisms of the Bible's reliability must be taken seriously.³ But if accurate prophecy and miracles carved a consistent message out of our very history, then the Bible truly is the word of God, an authenticated and reliable communication from him to us.⁴

Since the Bible claims to be divine revelation, we have in our possession a *possible* answer to our questions about God—a real, objective and rational answer. Its unique claims, and the way it develops themes across centuries as if from a single mind, make it truly fascinating, if not compelling—like a burning bush on a mountainside which simply must be investigated.

Perhaps the Bible's claims will turn out to be false. Perhaps on inquiry the burning bush will turn out to be just a trick of the light. But there is no underlying reason why the Bible has to be false. If God is real and personal, why should we be surprised that he would communicate with us in human language? And how else would we know that this revelation is truly from God unless he revealed it in a way that only God could, by miraculous signs and wonders, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD God did ... before human eyes?

And what, after all, is the alternative? If the Bible is not what it claims to be, then it would seem that God has not communicated with us in any way we could reasonably authenticate. We would be left knowing that God exists, that he is real and is a Person, but having no way to know for sure who he is and what his purposes are. More ominously, we would have no way of knowing why we are not on very good speaking terms.

The purpose of this little study is not to prove the Bible, or even to say very much about its message. The purpose is to explain why I will explore the Bible for answers to the difficult questions that are raised once we acknowledge God's personal existence. We may not like all we find there. I didn't. But God does not require my approval. Like objects approaching the speed of light, I must bend myself around truths that will not budge.

In a way unique in all religion, the Bible claims to be divine revelation. If it is what it claims to be, then there really is a way to know the Living God.

Let's see what it says ...

The next pamphlet in this series is entitled "Suffering," and explores how God can be good, given the mass of pain and evil in the world.

(Endnotes)

- 1 These themes were addressed in the first BC series pamphlet, The Reality of God.
- 2 cf. Isaiah 43:8-13; 44:6-8, 24-28; 46:8-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.
- 3 Of course, simply denying the Bible's validity does not, in itself, constitute a valid criticism. One cannot say, "Isaiah obviously did not prophesy the Babylonian exile because it is impossible to predict the future," or "Jesus obviously did not literally rise from the dead because nobody can rise from the dead." Such comments are not valid criticisms; they are arbitrary statements of unbelief.

- 4 There are, of course, two religions other than Christianity which could reasonably make this claim of being founded on history-based revelation. Judaism is founded on what Christians call the Old Testament. Islam essentially kept the Old Testament, but replaced the apostolic understanding of Jesus with writings of Mohammed to create the Koran. I imagine that evaluating which is valid would be very challenging for anyone brought up in one of these three religions. As one who grew up an atheist, the solution seemed straightforward to me: how essential is the New Testament understanding of Jesus Christ for completing the historical message of the Old Testament? I discuss that question in a later booklet in this series, called Jesus Christ.



World



BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This third study assumes the existence of God and the relevance of the Bible, and explores how the brokenness of our world is consistent with a good God.



JESUS

God Bible World Jesus Faith



BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This fourth study assumes the existence of God, the relevance of the Bible, and what it says about why the world is broken, and explores how Jesus Christ is restoring God's original design.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”
John 6:68-69

Jesus Christ is unique. No single individual has had a more profound effect upon humanity. Millions of people have believed him to be the divine Creator dwelling in human flesh, able to reconcile mankind with God. These believers have included people of all kinds, from slaves to heads of state, from serfs and laborers to artists and great scientists. No other figure has proven so compelling to people of every race, nationality, language, age and century. While his followers have often been divided and divisive, Jesus himself is a man not only for all seasons but all cultures and all times. As the third millennia of his ministry begins, his followers are multiplying all over the world as never before.

Jesus' uniqueness, however, goes back much further than the 2,000 years since his birth. The importance of all that Jesus Christ began stems from all that he finished when he originally came.

When opening the Scriptures to study their record of Christ, it is common for people to turn to the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. But these narratives of Jesus' life and work are the climax of an epic history stretching back to the beginning of the human race. It is in that story, called the Old Testament, that we find all the threads which come together in Jesus. The New Testament bonds to the Old like Velcro; the fibers of each designed to hook into the other. It is as if all the biblical authors over all the centuries were guided by one Author intent on telling one grand story, a story that stretches from a final climactic vision of the future all the way back to the first recorded prophecy of all time ...

The Promise

The beginning of Genesis is an outline of the entire Bible to come. Its first three chapters describe the origin of the human race, its purpose, tragedy and hope of redemption.¹

To summarize this introduction: God created humanity with a purpose. The first pair were called to give birth to a vast family exercising responsible dominion over the earth in a way that glorifies God's character, intelligence and artistic skill. Instead, they set a very different course for their posterity, purposefully heeding the seductive suggestion to grab for dominion independently from God. Living apart from God is what the Bible calls sin. Human sin resulted in a just but terrible divine judgment: God left humanity to its own devices. This separation from the true and living God resulted in a general decay of humanity's dominion, health, emotional and social stability, and ultimately the phenomenon of death.

The Bible understands death far differently than modern secularized man. The popular modern view holds that a human being is 100% physical, a collection of atoms with no inherent meaning—biological systems that cease functioning (die) without ever having any real significance at all. In contrast, the Bible asserts that a human being is a combination of the physical with the spiritual, a body joined with a soul by a personal God who gives meaning and purpose. Separation from God results in the deterioration of both body and soul until they tear apart from each other (death). Neither the physical atoms nor the spiritual soul of any individual ceases to exist, and the Bible warns that when this phase of human history is completed, body and soul will be reunited so that every human being will continue on forever, either eternally dead (separated from God) or eternally alive (reconciled to him).

Having initially explained why death dominates our experience today, the rest of the Bible goes on to trace a plan of reconciliation (life) set in motion by God at the very beginning.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Genesis 3:15

This prophecy was spoken by God to the serpent, the diabolical figure whose temptation brought us to ruin. But although it is phrased as a curse upon the Devil, it is primarily a gracious promise of deliverance from the sin and death into which Adam and Eve’s children were plummeted. The wording is heavily symbolic, but not too difficult to grasp. Using the vivid image of feminine hostility toward snakes, the prophecy predicts the future undoing of the human tragedy.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman.” Since God is addressing the serpent at this point, “you” refers to him, while “the woman” must refer to Eve (there was no other woman at the time!). Here is a bold proclamation of sovereign divine grace. Eve freely chose the Devil’s way over God’s. God vows to move Eve’s soul so that she will change her mind and freely reject the Devil, thus returning her allegiance to the Lord. This prophecy decrees a profound change of heart. God’s purpose is not only to reverse sin’s consequence (death), but to move us to reject the sin itself which brought death upon us. Part of Satan’s punishment will be to see Eve learn to hate him and all he stands for, seeking her Creator’s love once again.

“... and between your offspring and hers.” This profound change of heart, this reconciliation with God, will extend far beyond Eve. The prophecy contemplates two lines of “offspring,” or future generations. One is associated with Satan and the other with Eve. The Devil, of course, does not have babies. The Bible is quite comfortable, however, with language that refers to people who follow the Devil as his “children.”² Part of humanity, therefore, is portrayed as those who persist in following Satan’s sinful lead. The “offspring of the woman” refers to those in future generations who, like Eve, experience an inner transformation, reject sin, and find reconciliation with God.

This one verse provides the interpretive key to the entire Old Testament, just as the Old Testament claims to be the interpretive key to human experience. The Bible sees all of human history as a working out of God's promise of reconciliation—a promise that God will reconcile himself with a group of people drawn from the larger human family. As the Bible's story progresses, we come to understand that this family will include every ethnic flavor of mankind, and that being "born" into this family is not a matter of race, but rather a matter of personal faith.

Starting in the next chapter, the story unfolds as succeeding generations divide into two distinct streams, the smaller one associated with faith and the prophecy of God's blessing. Throughout the Old Testament, this redemptive stream is represented by a single genealogical line. Abel trusts in God, not Cain. Seth replaces Abel, and the line starts again. This "covenant line" is traced down to Noah, where again, it starts over. Wherever there is a genealogical fork in the road, the text always makes clear which descendent is the "woman's offspring" who carries on God's promise of reconciliation.

Genesis and the rest of the Bible include many fascinating stories. They are, however, more than an anthology of ethnic literature. They are tied together over many centuries by a single purpose. The Old Testament was written to trace the survival and the adventures of one particular family line, the line associated with God's promise of salvation.

"he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 ends with a dramatic twist. Suddenly, "the offspring of the woman" are all represented by a masculine singular, "he." Eventually, one specific individual represents everyone who will ever be reconciled to God. Apparently, reconciliation with God is something that must be accomplished by somebody in particular. This special somebody will single-handedly destroy the Devil's influence through a victory that comes at great personal cost. He must, as it were, brave deadly venom to accomplish his work.

The oldest biblical prophecy on record, then, is a promise of life, a promise of reconciliation with God. While Adam and Eve's children continue in their parents' sinful ways, God will always remember his vow to reawaken the hearts of many to trust him again. Ultimately, he will destroy Satan's work through a single individual who is willing to face personal suffering in order to bring people back to God.

That is the promise. Further defining it, exploring it and illustrating it becomes the unifying theme of the Old Testament.

The Promise Unfolds

The early chapters of Genesis throw a searchlight through the mists of an otherwise unrecorded past to illuminate an ancient promise of salvation from sin and death. Beginning in Chapter 12, this story merges with the common written history of humanity, including people and events often mentioned outside of the Bible.

This epic story of one family eventually becomes the history of the family-nation of Israel. Unlike most other histories, however, the point of the narrative is never how wonderful these people are (with all respect, they are as disappointing as the rest of us). The point is rather how God progressively reveals to them more and more about himself, and the coming one who will sacrifice himself to reconcile many with God.

The Lord used this family-nation as a brush on the canvas of history to paint a lavish and colorful picture of the coming Savior and his work.³ Scattered throughout Old Testament history are repeated historical models of this Champion and his victory. There is Noah and the ark, in which one faithful person brings humanity through God's righteous judgment. There is the covenant with Abraham, in which God vows to personally stand in a pool of his own blood in order to fulfill his promises. There is Moses, a servant who delivers God's chosen people from slavery to a Promised Land through a Passover sacrifice. There are a series of Judges who single-handedly achieve victory and deliverance.

There is King David, the shepherd who establishes a kingdom to glorify God. In addition to these living political models, God also provided Israel with prophets and with a carefully crafted priestly system in the Temple.

Even the Temple itself was a model, architecturally designed to illustrate how the coming representative of the woman's seed would reconcile humanity to God.⁴ Its architecture preached that the Lord could be approached only by a single High Priest who offered a perfect substitutionary sacrifice to satisfy God's just wrath against human sin. That way, God's holiness could be honored even as sinners were forgiven. The prophets delivered divine explanations of these historical models, and the authenticity of their explanations was vindicated by miraculous signs—often including the prediction of future events.

The most striking predictions of all were those that directly spoke of the Champion himself. He was prophesied to be God on earth, a divine shepherd who would come to care for his flock.⁵ It was foretold that he would be born in Bethlehem⁶ and teach in Israel's northern area, called Galilee.⁷ He would preach the Word of God,⁸ enter Jerusalem on a donkey's colt,⁹ and suffer so as to literally bear the sins of many.¹⁰ Ultimately, he would reign as King over God's eternal kingdom,¹¹ and thus fulfill all that the Old Testament prophets, priests and kings modeled. Because each of those Hebrew officers were set apart by anointing, the promised Champion was called the anointed one—"Messiah" in Hebrew—"Christ" when the word was translated into the Greek.

Through the laws and customs God gave Israel and through the way he shaped their history, the cryptic promise of Genesis 3:15 was carved out in great detail. And all the while, the genealogy went on, link by link, toward its climax in the Champion of the "woman's seed."¹²

However, while the Old Testament ends with its genealogy intact, it is unfinished. A picture of the promised Christ had been drawn, but he himself was yet to appear.

The Promise Fulfilled

The New Testament makes its principal point in its very first chapter, where Matthew declares the great genealogy to be complete.¹³ Consider the significance of this rather amazing fact: Jesus Christ is the only person who has a complete connected genealogy going back to the beginning of the human race!¹⁴ Everyone must have such an ancestry, of course. The point is that only Christ's has been recorded, and recorded specifically as a fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. No other religious figure, no other human being for that matter, can make such a claim. If God did, indeed, originally promise to overcome the human tragedy of sin and death, that Savior simply *has* to be Jesus Christ. But how do we know that this story of a fulfilled promise is any more than just a story?

Jesus was vindicated the same way God vindicated those who prepared for his arrival, through miracles. In this regard, it is important to appreciate the purpose of miracles. Contrary to popular thinking, biblical miracles were not performed to stimulate faith.¹⁵ Neither were they supposed to be a normal way of life for those who believe. Miracles were highly abnormal events which provided an objective basis for recognizing divine revelation. Miracles were unusual and dramatic "attesting signs" which demonstrated the authenticity of God's prophets.¹⁶ With the final prophetic work of Jesus' apostles, the need for such signs has passed.¹⁷

Jesus' miracles take on a whole new dimension when they are understood as linking him with the Old Testament promise. Jesus did not heal, or multiply loaves or raise the dead just because they were neat things to do. Each miracle intelligently identified him with an Old Testament theme or a figure who modeled him in the past. They underscored that he was the one prophesied to fulfill God's ancient promise of reconciliation. He was, in fact, God incarnate (in human flesh), come to fulfill that promise personally.¹⁸

The miracles pointed to Jesus' authenticity, and his teaching illuminated the Old Testament's meaning. But none of that actually overcame the alienation that severed us from God and condemned us to death. That happened at the cross and the empty tomb.

Christ's cross was a judicial execution, a condemnation by both Jews and Gentiles together. The Bible discloses, however, that it was much more than that. As a fulfillment of God's promise to reconcile a people to himself, God took human form in the Person of Jesus and willingly accepted the condemnation of crucifixion.¹⁹ On the cross, God-in-the-flesh took upon himself the kind of condemnation justly earned by an erring humanity. As a human being, God became a substitute for all the "woman's seed," bearing the divine judgment and death they deserved.²⁰ Thus, a way became clear for God to reconcile sinners to himself, and still remain a righteous God who will not tolerate sin.²¹

Jesus' work did not end with the cross, however. On the third day after his death, he rose again. In his resurrection, Christ vindicated the effectiveness of the cross²² and personally inaugurated a new humanity reconciled with our Creator.²³ With the just condemnation of sin vicariously accomplished, the way was clear to begin healing souls—souls of people now reconciled to God through faith in Christ.

This new humanity continues to multiply through the sharing of faith so that "the woman's offspring" increasingly includes people of every possible ethnic background.²⁴ The history we all learn in history books, while important, is just a backdrop for the outworking of this great redemption around the world, as the risen Jesus personally calls person after person to be "reborn" by faith into God's family through faith. When this family of faith is complete to God's satisfaction, the Bible clearly states that Jesus will return in person to end this phase of history and move mankind forward into its eternal destiny.

The Promise Considered

What a story, and one that claims to be entirely true!²⁵ Christianity rests this claim on actual history, most especially on the historical event of Christ's cross and resurrection.²⁶ The Christian faith, therefore, is not about a pretend story concocted to make us feel better, but a true story of what God is actually accomplishing in time and space.

The last booklet in this series will go on to address the issue of faith and what faith involves. This discussion comes now to a close with the simple observation that Jesus Christ is worthy of our serious scrutiny.

Why? Because the Old Testament deals with the human condition like no other book. Buddhism and Hinduism are cultural philosophies; nature religions and the New Age are subjective points of view. By contrast, the Old Testament reveals an objective God who acts in history.

And the initial prophecy that gave the Old Testament its form and purpose could only be fulfilled by one individual—not Moses, not Mohammed—but Jesus Christ. He was the last link in the carefully preserved genealogical chain of the “woman's offspring,” the *only* possible candidate to fulfill God's ancient promise of redemption. He alone did what needed to be done to overcome the barrier of guilt and moral failure that would otherwise forever separate us from a holy God. He alone conquered death. In him, our alienation from God can end and real life can begin.

There is good, intelligent reason to pursue faith in Christ, however long it takes to find him and whatever that requires.

Of course, there are plenty of other options if all we want is a religion to comfort us. If “God” is merely a creation of our own minds or culture, then it doesn't really matter what philosophy we hang on the wall while we wait to die and be forgotten.

Jesus Christ uniquely represents the alternative. His is the story of a Creator who invested us with purpose. When humanity

rejected that purpose, God personally stepped in to offer us a way back.

Biblical faith is hard to swallow. It requires death to the way of thinking and living we are used to. It requires trust in a God who has every reason to condemn us. It requires faith in the life and love of someone who died two millennia ago.

Jesus' first disciples understood all this. When others went off to look for other options, Jesus asked them if they wanted to leave, too. Peter's answer says it all ...

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”
John 6:68-69

As challenging as this story sounds, Jesus Christ remains the *only* rational hope the world has ever known.

If this makes sense, then the only question left is what faith in Christ would mean for me? How can I become part of Christ's story?

The last pamphlet in this series is entitled “Faith,” and explores what it means to personally believe and follow Jesus Christ.

(Endnotes)

- 1 These themes are explored in greater depth in a companion booklet entitled, *Suffering*.
- 2 John 8:42-44.
- 3 Luke 24:36-47; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11; 1 Peter 1:10-12.
- 4 The key element of the Tabernacle/Temple was its “pattern,” cf. Exodus 25:9,40. A good place to begin studying the significance of this pattern is Hebrews 8-10.
- 5 Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34 (John 10:1-18).
- 6 Micah 5:2 (cf. Matthew 2:1-6).
- 7 Isaiah 9:1-7 (Matthew 4:13-16).

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- 8 Isaiah 11:1-5; 61:1-3 (cf. Luke 4:14-21)
- 9 Zechariah 9:9 (cf. John 12:12-16).
- 10 Isaiah 53; also Psalm 22 (Acts 8:26-35; 1 Peter 2:21-25).
- 11 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23-31; Hebrews 1:1-5).
- 12 Analysis of Old Testament patterns make it clear that its genealogies are recorded in compressed form. That is, “X was the son of Y” might well mean that X was the great grandson of Y. The point was to representatively connect a complete genealogy. As a result, the total timeline represented may go back 10,000 years or more.
- 13 The Gospel of Matthew was written largely for a Jewish audience, and so concentrates on the genealogy only back to Abraham. The Gospel of Luke completes the entire connection back to Adam (cf. Luke 3).
- 14 Biblical genealogies did not attempt to record every link, but encapsulated large chunks of time by simply connecting highlighted individuals in the chain. Hence, Jesus could be called “the son of David,” skipping a number of generations in between but still keeping the chain connected.
- 15 Jesus specifically renounced such a practice, Matthew 12:39; 16:4.
- 16 cf. Exodus 4:1-9 (and all the miracles to follow); 1 Kings 18:16-39; John 14:11 (especially the resurrection); 2 Corinthians 12:12. The point of miracles is to give objective evidence that a speaker is from God. Such evidence, however, does not necessarily stimulate faith in the hearers. Faith is as much a moral issue as it is an intellectual one. Biblical miracles point the way to reconciliation with God; they do not make anyone desire the journey.
- 17 cf. Hebrews 1:1-3; Revelation 22:18-19. Please note that God still exercises sovereign power as much today as ever. There is simply no longer any need for dramatic flashes of the supernatural on command in order to highlight his spokesman. The message of Christ is complete and his resurrection is the ultimate attesting sign.
- 18 Isaiah 40:1-11; 59:9-20 (cf. Mark 1:1-4; John 1:1-18).
- 19 Philippians 2:5-11.
- 20 Corinthians 5:19-21; 1 Peter 2:21-25 (cf. Isaiah 53).
- 21 Romans 3:21-26.
- 22 see again 1 Corinthians 15:12-58

23 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2.

24 Revelation 5:9-10. The Bible is very clear that the people of God will be completely multi-ethnic, so as to demonstrate that our self-centered pride has nothing to do with our salvation, which is based entirely on God's grace and love.

25 John 3:31-33; 18:37

26 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 ff.



FAITH



BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This last study brings us to the end of a journey to Christ, exploring a new life and new journey with him.

I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord. *Hosea 2:19-20*

This verse address is engraved on the inside of my wedding ring because it summarizes what marriage is meant to be. It is the marriage vow the Lord took with his people of the Old Testament. It teaches that the faith that connects us to God has the characteristics of a good marriage.

We find here all the themes we have encountered on our journey toward Christ. There is God's righteousness, his holy character that originally created mankind with the noble and delicious charge to rule the earth in his name. There is justice, the good and proper judgment of a holy God in response to what we have actually done with our lives and with this planet. There is compassion, the desire of God's heart to forgive sin and restore a people to himself. There is lovingkindness, the biblical word describing faithfulness to a promise—in this case, God's promise to personally pay the price required by justice in order to forgive. There is knowing God, a reconciled relationship with him that lasts forever, which is the whole point and goal of biblical faith.¹

Knowing all this information is one thing. But how does one actually become one of God's people, a follower of Jesus?

The answer is not difficult. If belonging to God through Jesus is like a marriage, then beginning that relationship is like getting married.

When we think of getting married, we think of weddings. Our culture has exalted the wedding to a gala affair, often requiring

considerably more preparation than is given to prepare for the responsibilities of marriage.

The Bible recognizes the joy of weddings, but leaves such matters to the culture and individuals involved. All that is required for marriage is a conscious personal decision and public commitment to enter into a specific life-long relationship.

Christian faith takes the shape of an ongoing relationship with Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. But such a relationship has to begin somewhere, with a conscious personal decision. This prevents us from being deceived about the nature of real faith. Faith in Christ is more than just sincerely affirming the facts of who he is and what he accomplished. Faith is more than simply believing true things about Christ. The Apostle James pointed this out:

You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. *James 2:19*

Obviously, confidence in the facts concerning Christ is necessary for faith. But if even the Devil believes all the facts about Jesus, the faith that makes me one of God's people must be something more. Being personally reconciled to God involves the decision to enter into a mutual personal commitment with Christ, something akin to a marriage without the sexual overtones. We enter into similar marriage-like commitments when joining the army or entering into any legal contract. However much we approve of a contract, it is not in force until I sign on the dotted line.

That may make faith sound too business like, though. The biblical model is more like a marriage of love. The Lord has done all the pursuing out of love for me. But he does not force himself on anyone. We must be captivated by him and want the love he offers.

God's Proposal

The biblical model of salvation is the *covenant*, an ancient word describing a binding relationship between two parties. In a covenant, each party commits himself or herself in a specific, mutually agreed upon manner. Marriage is the most common example of a covenant.² In fact, the Bible understands the concept of love in terms of faithfulness to one's covenant relationships.³

When God created our first parents, the covenant he established with them and their children was simple: God would pour out his love by giving us unending blessedness in his presence. We were to return our love through joyful and trusting obedience. Tragically, our first parents rejected that covenant, thereby forfeiting our blessedness and twisting the human spirit into something incapable of enjoying obedience to God.

In order to reestablish his covenant with sinful humanity, God came to us in Christ to bear the penalty of our sin (death) and begin to untwist our spirit so as to freely offer joyful obedience once more. Christ's death on the cross covers the offense of rejecting God, and his resurrection enables him to bring God's Spirit to renew our spirit.

Because of Christ's death on behalf of sinners, we can enter into a new covenant as if there had never been any sin separating us from God. For those in this new covenant, all sin—past, present and future—was vicariously punished on the cross, just as if sinners had hung there in agony instead of Jesus, fully paying for their own sins. More than that, when Christ assumed our place on the cross, he enabled us to assume his place in God's heart. This means that the original covenant offered at creation has been significantly amended; it has become a covenant of amazing grace. Our sin need no longer prevent us from receiving God's perfect blessing. That blessing becomes partially accessible throughout this life, and will become available without measure when the Church is complete and Christ returns.

Jesus makes a new relationship with God available to sinners, but we still must personally accept God's proposal and enter into that new covenant by our own choice. Entering into the covenant requires confidence in what Jesus did, is doing and shall do, along with an unreserved commitment to trust and obey God in all things. While Christ's completed work covers the ongoing failure of still-imperfect believers, the sincere desire to obey is necessary evidence that our faith is saving faith.⁴ True faith wants to rediscover God's design. While it's true that even our sincerity is imperfect, God knows the heart and sees the earnest desire to trust and obey him again.

Confidence in the work of Jesus the Savior and an earnest desire to follow him as Lord are the marks of the Holy Spirit of God already at work in us.⁵ This combination of Christ-centered confidence and Christ-centered commitment is what the Bible knows as saving faith.

So, in light of all this, what must we actually do in order to enter into God's covenant of loving grace—a covenant that will make God our friend, remold our lives and secure us eternal blessedness?

"I Do"

What we must do is recognize the faith in Christ which God has created within us⁶—faith in God's gracious offer to restore our relationship with him—and offer to him our promise of joyful obedience.

It is important to realize that God's promise in no way depends upon our obedience, since Christ has both obeyed God on our behalf and accepted the punishment for disobedience that we deserve. But if Christ has earned my trust in God, then a genuine desire to obey is the natural and inevitable result, however imperfectly I live that out.

Accepting God's promise to love me in Christ, and promising to love him in return is the equivalent of saying, "I do." It's such a simple act, but with such large consequences! In this case, we

become one of God's people, his family, in a new humanity that will one day rule the earth as he originally intended.

Exercising faith seems an awfully simple requirement to affect great changes. But remember that the benefits of salvation do not come from changes we make in ourselves; they come from a restored relationship with God. To again use the analogy of marriage, the union of commoners with royalty benefits the commoners immensely, not because of what they bring to the marriage, but because of all that royalty is willing to share. Christian faith does not initiate a relationship based upon our virtue and strength, but rather accepts a relationship based upon God's.

In other words, the value of Christian faith is not what it says about our heart—the quality of our godly emotions or spiritual strength of will. The value of faith is what our heart has chosen to say about God. Faith believes that God is, that God is good, that our suffering is our fault, not his, and he has wonderfully provided amazing grace to bring us back to his original design.

The Lord requires nothing less from us, but nothing more. Nothing more is necessary. Faith believes that all our guilt—past, present and future—has been buried in Christ's tomb and left there when he rose. Faith believes we will gladly spend the rest of eternity pleasing God out of grateful joy for the opportunity to do so. All God requires is faith, for he knows that former commoners will naturally adopt royal manners in time.

Whenever you are prepared to accept Christ's death as a gracious substitute for your own, and want to devote the rest of your life to honoring God to the best of your ability, the covenant between you and the Lord is established. You have said by your faith, "I do." God sees your heart and at that point considers you to be his friend and family forever.⁷

Of course, as with a marriage or any other covenant, it is fitting and helpful to mark our new relationship with special ceremony. Public commitments ground our emotions in reality and enable us to share our joy with others who have discovered Christ, too.

Christ gave us two ceremonies (called *sacraments*) to publicly celebrate and share our relationship with him. Jesus adapted them from the Old Testament to illustrate how he is the fulfillment of everything God promised. The first is Baptism, a symbolic washing that accompanies the entrance into discipleship.⁸ The second is The Lord's Supper (also called the Lord's Table, or Communion or the Eucharist), a symbolic meal where we share our fellowship with the risen Christ himself.⁹

The sacraments were designed by Christ to be shared by all his people, whom the Bible calls his Church (the word means a congregating of people). Christ's Church comes in all sorts of flavors. A good Church is one that clearly trusts Jesus and strives to be faithful to his Bible. It is important to choose a Church fellowship wisely. Ask advice from Christians who obviously enjoy their faith and try to live according to God's Word.

If you desire right now to belong to Christ, I encourage you to offer up to God a personal prayer of faith. Please understand that such prayers are not magical incantations that bring us to God. It certainly doesn't matter how fancy they sound (though when speaking to God, we should always do our best). Prayer is simply talking directly to God, and we need to talk to God in order to say "I do." I recommend the following:

- Plan a time and place where you can be alone with God.
- Read a passage or two of the Bible, such as John 1:1-18; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 5:1-2; 10:9-13 or Hebrews 10:15-17. If you do not have a Bible, or are unfamiliar with how to use one, ask a Christian you respect for help, or go to www.spepchurch.org and use the contact information there to request some assistance.
- Tell God of your desire to be his friend and a part of his family forever.
- Acknowledge that you cannot claim his love based on how you have lived, and that your sin has rendered you incapable of giving him the love and obedience he deserves.

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- Express to God your confidence in what he did through Jesus Christ to make reconciliation with him possible.
 - Explain to God your earnest commitment to relearn how to love him by treating Jesus as the Lord of your life.
 - Ask God to help you find a Church that honors him well, where you can learn to live out your faith with others who share it.

If such a prayer reflects the desires of your heart, then the Lord Jesus would like to openly seal his new relationship with you—make it “official” and open for all the world to see! His seal is baptism. If you were baptized as a child, then confessing your faith in a Christian church will affirm and complete the promises God made at that time. If you have never been baptized, the Church you join will make that a part of your welcome into God’s family.

Always remember that the Lord’s love for you can never again be diminished by your failures—you belong to him now, and he belongs to you. He will work with you year after year to grow in spiritual wisdom and integrity. This world is still dying, and much suffering will continue until Jesus returns. But though the world is still dying, you have come alive. Death will merely mark the end of this world’s claims upon your body, and its scars upon your soul. You will be resurrected as Jesus was, to pursue life forever as it was meant to be lived.

Faith endures and grows over time. Since this world is in general rebellion against its Creator, expect your faith to be seriously tested over and over.¹⁰ That’s why you constantly need the Bible, prayer and the fellowship of other believers to maintain spiritual confidence and communion with Christ.

But your life will never be the same. Jesus’ love, integrity, kindness and hope will shine through you. You will become the light of the world.¹¹

Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on this journey of faith. I do urge you to consider these matters in depth and make a decision about your response to Jesus Christ. This is the most important thing you will ever do.

And as I like to say ... you will never regret it.

(Endnotes)

- 1 This booklet assumes familiarity with the biblical notion of sin and its consequences, as well as an understanding of who Christ is and what he accomplished. These matters are treated in earlier pamphlets in this series.
- 2 The Bible likens the relationship of God to his people as that of a husband to his wife. See Ephesians 5:21-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2 and Revelation 19:9.
- 3 Deuteronomy 10:12-13; Romans 13:8-10.
- 4 Romans 7:14-8:17; John 14:22-24; 1 John 2:1-6.
- 5 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3.
- 6 John 6:28-29.
- 7 John 1:12-13.
- 8 Matthew 18:18-20. A “disciple” is a trainee, someone who is being taught by a Master — in this case, by Jesus. You may already have been initiated by your parents as a disciple when you were a child. If so, then the next step is to enter into the Lord’s Supper with full understanding and commitment.
- 9 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.
- 10 John 15:18-21; Romans 8:18-25, 35-39; 1 Peter 4:12-14.
- 11 Jesus actually said that! Matthew 5:14-16.



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All Bible quotations are from the ESV®
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