

LIFE WITH GOD THROUGH JESUS.



An Introduction to Christian Faith.

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Misconceptions

These days, even in Western cultures that historically have been influenced by Christianity, there is an increasing ignorance about the message of the Bible and the nature of Christian faith. Some of this is because of mixed messages that come from so-called Christians who say they believe in Jesus but fail to follow his teachings. Some of this is because of the reluctance of people to engage deeply with the Bible. Too often people react to false and incomplete information and never hear the complete message.

One great misconception is about the Christian image of God. It is popular to envision God as an old bearded man with a bit of a temper. It becomes difficult to imagine how such a being could exist somewhere out there in heaven. It becomes completely unappealing to think of a God who demands that you behave and is quick to judge you when you do not.

Related to this misunderstanding about the nature of God is an equally important misconception about how God expects us to relate with him. Many people equate religion with morality and ritual. While it is true that religions have strong opinions about right and wrong, the message of the Bible is more than a list of things to do and not do.

A common line of thinking is that if you learn to live rightly then God will put aside his anger and show you favor. This earn your favor religion, however, is far from what God intended. While the Bible gives guidance for life, it does so from the context of grace. God is not looking for opportunities to judge us, but rather seeks to inspire obedience through love.

This short booklet will address these two misconceptions by providing a biblical understanding of the nature of God and how we as humans are invited to respond to him. We will see that God is a God of love and grace. Although he stands for justice, his desire is to be in relationship with humanity. We will see that instead of working hard to put God in our debt, we are invited to respond to him in humility and trust.

We will spend some time considering how God has worked throughout history, but a significant amount of our time will be focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It's About Jesus

The essence of Christianity is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the main character of the Bible. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus. The word Christ-ian means Christ follower. The word Christ is not a personal name, but is itself a title. Christ is the Greek work for the Hebrew word "messiah". The messiah was God's promised deliverer. He is God's anointed king, or chosen one. The Christ is a savior or rescuer. He is also a teacher or one who rules with authority.

To understand Christianity, therefore, one needs to understand Jesus. To understand Jesus however, one needs to consider a much larger story. If Jesus is a saviour, what is he saving us from? If Jesus is a teacher and leader, what is he calling us to do? So before we look in detail at Jesus, we need to go back to the beginning.

Back to the Beginning

The Christian understanding of the world is heavily indebted to the book of Genesis. Genesis means beginning and is the first book of the Old Testament. Genesis offers a description of God and begins to outline what it looks like to relate to him.

God the Giver of Life

The very first sentence in the Bible sets the stage.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

Genesis 1:1

One cannot begin to understand Christian thinking without recognizing God as the creator of everything. Far from being a bearded man in the sky, the Bible teaches that God is the source of all things. He is not one being within the universe, but rather the uncreated source of all existence. God himself is uncontained by time and space. People make a mistake when they think they could use science to discover God as if they could travel to his location or measure godliness. The Judeo-Christian worldview understands that our universe is contingent and dependent on something that itself is eternal and uncaused. Something has to have always existed. If science itself suggests that our universe had a beginning in the Big Bang, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is something outside the universe which gives it being.

Christians have varying opinions about the specific details of the process of creation. Although the book of Genesis describes God creating the world in six days, the intent of this book was not to describe the how and when, but rather the who and why. The Bible would certainly reject any notion of natural evolution that excluded

God's guidance. At the same time, our reading of Genesis should not stifle scientific investigation. Genesis is not interested in the questions that we bring to it from our modern perspective. We are interested in the origins of the materials, but Genesis speaks of the ordering of the materials to serve particular functions. Many clues within the text show that it is a story of how God shaped the world for human life. For instance, when light is created on the first day the modern mind thinks of photons and light waves but Genesis calls the light day and the darkness night. It is more interested in the function of light and dark as it serves human life than it is about the origins of particles and waves.

With all of this in mind, we should not get distracted by the so-called conflicts between religion and science. The Bible addresses issues which are more philosophical than scientific. It offers an answer to why anything exists more than it offers an answer to how things were made.

The core vision of the first chapters of Genesis and the Christian understanding of the world is that God is the giver of life and all things are dependent on him.

God who Relates Personally

God is not understood to be an impersonal powerful force. He is not a distant engineer who has crafted this universe to sit back and watch it unwind. The first chapter of Genesis is equally clear that God desires to relate to his creation. This is evidenced in the fact that God created humanity in his image.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27

To be created in God's image has nothing to do with shape or form. God is spirit and does not have a body. If both male and female are created in the image of God, then it is clear that the image has nothing to do with body parts. To be created in God's image is to be created with a capacity to form a relationship with him. The image of God is seen in the ways in which humanity differs from the rest of creation. We have a rational thinking mind, ability to communicate with language, capacity to love, an appreciation of beauty and a sense of right and wrong.

God is relational. His motivation to create is entirely based on love. Much later in the Bible we are told that God is love (1 John 4:16) and so the act of creation is an act of self giving, an act of welcoming humanity into loving relationship.

This also begins to give us a clue as to how God expects us to relate with him. It is important for us to understand that from the beginning, God's intent is that we live life with him. We are not created to be servants who do his bidding and stroke his ego. As his image bearers, we were made for personal relationship.

This idea of personal relationship did not begin with creation, it was essential to the character of God. Christians understand that there is one God who has eternally existed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This concept, called the Trinity, stretches our understanding, but is profoundly important to the nature of God. Christians would resist the idea that there are three gods and they would resist the idea that there is one God who wears three different "masks". The three persons are capable of relating to

each other, but they are not entirely independent from each other. There is a way in which God is one and a way in which he is three.

The complicated doctrine of the Trinity is embraced because it is taught in the scriptures and is the only explanation of how God can be love. The nature of love is to move outside of oneself to love someone else. If God were only one person, there would be nothing for him to love before he created this world. But because God has eternally existed in three persons, there was love between Father, Son and Spirit even before the creation of the universe. Humanity is welcomed into loving community which is essential to the nature of God.

One does not need to completely comprehend the concept of the Trinity in order to be a Christian, but one does need to see that God is personal and desires that we live with him. He has made us in his image so that we can relate with him personally.

God who Partners with People

One significant aspect of our personal relationship with God is a sense of partnership with him. Our creator God made us in his image so that we could be his representatives on earth. To be made in the image of God is to reflect God and bear his image to the rest of the world.

God blessed them and said to them "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Genesis 1:28

All humanity is invited to live, thrive, build and create. We grow families, plant gardens, build communities and form cultures. When we are in right relationship with God, this partnership will be a blessing to all people, animals and the planet.

How should we Respond?

So far we have seen that the biblical understanding of God is that he is the giver of life who relates personally through love and invites us to work with him in the world he has made.

If God is the giver of life then we his creation ought to live in humble dependence on him. Because he has given us life and breath and everything, we owe our allegiance to him. This is the life of faith. It trusts God to supply us life and to guide us in the way that is best.

And if God is the one who loves personally, those of us who are created in his image should gladly return that love. We ought to express our gratitude and seek to love him with heart, soul and strength. This love should also extend to our fellow humans for the Bible also teaches that to love God is to love our neighbour.

And if we are true partners with God, we will use our creativity and our resources to bring blessing to the world. We work and play as God's representatives serving his glory in all that we do.

God is looking for partners who will respond to him with love and trust. This is the good life, life with God.

The problem is that we as humans have not lived in right relationship with God. We fall well short of this loving, trusting partnership.

What went wrong?

The second and third chapters of Genesis tell the story of the first humans, Adam and Eve, who are tempted by the serpent to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in disobedience to God. Again our modern minds can be distracted by the question of whether or not this was an historical event or an allegorical story. The answer is somewhat irrelevant because in either case, the meaning of the story is the same.

Created in the image of God and with the capacity to love, humanity also has the capacity to reject. Love and trust are only meaningful when there is the possibility of turning away. One cannot be forced to love. As such, humanity was given a choice. They could eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they could continue to trust God who made the tree off limits.

This is far from an arbitrary act of obedience. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the source of wisdom and the definition of goodness. The choice is not about stealing fruit, it is about who gets to be in control, who gets to define what is good and evil. God says to all of us, "will you trust me to define the good; will you trust that my wisdom sees more clearly than your own?" To eat from the tree is to say, "I want to be in control, I want to choose what is best for myself." When Adam and Eve ate from the tree it was an expression of pride and a rejection of life with God.

Adam and Eve saw the fruit as a way to gain wisdom for themselves rather than receiving it from God.

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman

saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Genesis 3:4–6

Notice also that there was a sense of attraction to the fruit. It was good, pleasing and desirable. Rather than giving their love to God and finding satisfaction from him, they choose to look elsewhere and seek satisfaction in their own desires.

This is what Christians mean by the idea of sin. Ever since this first choice, all people have suffered from proud independence and misplaced love.

Each one of us makes this same choice, for we have all been corrupted by sin. There is something inside of us which chooses selfish pride instead of humble trust. There is something inside of us which chooses to love other things instead of God. We want to define good and evil for ourselves. In our desire for freedom we choose the things that harm us instead of the God who is the source of love and life.

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 3:23

This rejection of God is the underlying problem with humanity, it has disastrous results and requires a response from God.

The God of Justice

When people envision God to be a stern judge there is an element of truth. Misconceptions arise when people assume that this is the dominant character trait of God. If you miss the life giving and loving nature of God and only focus on justice you will be off-balance.

At the same time God's love does not eliminate judgment. We intuitively know that when great evil is done, not only is there devastating consequences on the victim, but justice demands that the oppressor be held accountable. We do not consider it loving to turn a blind eye towards evil. So for God to be perfectly loving he must also stand up for truth and justice. The early chapters of Genesis confirm that God warns people about the consequences of sin and he judges disobedience.

It is a mistake to see that God takes pleasure in punishment, but it is equally a mistake to see that God spares us from the consequences of our behaviour. Because of their disobedience, Adam and Eve are removed from the garden of paradise and become subject to both physical and spiritual death. Throughout the Bible it is clear that God is perfectly good and therefore must both restrain evil and seek justice. This anger and judgment of God is not contrary to his love.

"Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference... God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer... which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being." (Becky Pippert as quoted by Timothy Keller in *The Reason for God* pp.75-76)

This settled opposition of God against sin leads to several consequences in this life and in eternity.

Separation, Slavery and Death

When we turn our back on the source of love, we experience separation. We find ourselves in an awkward position. Our relationship with God is broken and beyond our ability to repair. This is symbolized by Adam and Eve who were cast out of God's garden. We were made for relationship with God, but we have been separated from him because of our choices. Just as in any human relationship, the price of our unfaithfulness to God is alienation. We were made to live with God, and we wither when we are apart from him.

Secondly, as we turn our back on partnership with God we find ourselves powerless. As we begin to worship other things, these new objects of worship ultimately enslave us. Some worship money and become weighed down with the demand to succeed and the despair of loss. Some worship beauty and die 1000 deaths as they trace every wrinkle and become confined by the opinion of others. Some put their hope in other human relationships and find themselves disappointed in the unfaithfulness of their partner or in an untimely death.

Wanting to choose the good for ourselves, we find ourselves incapable of creating a lasting good. Rather than partnering with God we work against him. We pollute the earth, break apart families and create cultures that celebrate our own desires. And when every person is ruled by pride, the results are disastrous within our community. Human history is a long list of casualties. The book of Genesis describes a sad downward spiral where brother kills brother and nation fights nation. The effects continue today.

Finally, our rejection of the giver of life will only lead to death. As it says in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." We all know the pain of physical death. It screams to us and proclaims that something is wrong with this world. And the death of our bodies is not the only form of death. There is a second death, a spiritual death which is the destiny of all who turn away from God the giver of life.

This second death is also referred to as hell. The biblical understanding of hell is not of a place where the devil hangs out with his pitch fork. It is described as a place of fire, but Christians hold differing opinions about what this means. Some see it as eternal torment, while others understand that it is a fire that destroys. One pastor sums it up well when he says "Hell is God's quarantine solution for people who prefer to hold on to their sin." (Cavey, Bruxy. Reunion) Hell is isolation from God. If you persist in rejecting God, God will ultimately give you what you want.

This human rebellion, however, is not the end of the story. These problems of separation, slavery and death will not have the last word. There is a new phase in God's plan.

Starting to Set Things Right

The story of God does not end in Genesis 3. God's plan is not defeated by human sin. The loving God, the giver of life, immediately begins a plan of restoration and in doing so he reveals himself to be a God of grace.

The God of Grace

Grace is an expression of love. Grace is a gift given to those who do not deserve it. Grace is God initiating something new even when humanity remains rebellious. In the Bible we see God's gracious character in his willingness to make promises. He takes initiative to bless people and work for restoration. This new work of God will culminate in the person of Jesus, but before we learn about him, we must get to know his ancestors and explore how grace was given to them.

Covenant with Israel.

The first phase of God's rescue plan was to choose for himself a nation of people with whom he forms a covenant. A covenant is a formal relationship where each party makes promises to the other. God began his restoration plan through the calling of a man named Abraham. God graciously made promises to Abraham and invited him into a covenant relationship. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and to make him a blessing.

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:2–3

In return, God invited Abraham to respond to him in trust. Abraham could not make this blessing happen. At the time he did not even have a child. He could not become a great nation unless God worked a miracle. The only thing Abraham could do was believe God. This is what covenant with God looks like. God promises a blessing, and people respond to him in love and trust.

This promise of blessing was extended to Abraham's descendents, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, who later would take the name Israel.

The majority of the Old Testament is a history of this developing relationship between God and the people of Israel. It is a long story told through several books. God blesses them by freeing them from slavery in Egypt and giving them the promised land of Canaan. He teaches them his will by giving them a law through Moses. He renews a partnership with them by establishing a kingdom through David that is meant to be a light to the nations. God make a promise to king David that one of his descendents will remain ask king forever. Time and again God shows himself faithful to these people. In grace he comes to them and makes promises to them in hope of renewing his relationship with humanity.

Persistent Rebellion

Sadly, the people of Israel do not fare much better than Adam and Eve. They do not accept God's definition of good and evil, for they constantly break his commandments. Most especially they failed to give their love to God and chose instead to worship idols. Instead of being an example to the nations, their kings become oppressors like everyone else. Over the years God disciplines them through

hardships but eventually must judge them through exile to Babylon.

God raises up prophets who warn the people and envision a future new phase of God's plan. The prophets look forward to what they call a new covenant where God's anointed king (messiah) will lead the people into a right relationship with God. Despite constant failures, the God of grace does not give up on humanity. The next phase of God's plan involves Jesus Christ who is God's anointed one who will establish a new and everlasting covenant.

New Relationship with God through Christ.

Jesus Christ was part of God's plan from the beginning. God had always known that humanity would fail and that Israel would be unfaithful. God knew that he would have to send his Son to set things right. Jesus represents a new phase in God's plan, but he is not unrelated to the past. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made by God in the Old Testament. Jesus is the descendant of Abraham who will bring blessing to all nations. Jesus is the descendant of David who will rule as king forever.

You can read about Jesus in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which are the first four books of the New Testament. In these gospels you will be introduced to Jesus who is a wonderful teacher and miracle worker and you can read about his death and resurrection. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are all significant in God's plan for humanity.

Jesus Confirms the Character of God

Jesus presented himself to be more than merely a prophet or religious teacher. Through the power of his miracles, the holiness of his life and the content of his teaching, Jesus claimed to be God. The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is God taking on human form. He is both fully God and fully human. Remembering the language of the Trinity, Jesus is understood to be God the Son. When Christians called Jesus the Son of God they do not mean that he was somehow created, but rather he relates to the other persons within the Trinity as a son relates to father. While both Father and Son are equally God, the father takes the role of initiating and the son takes the role of accomplishing.

If there are any lingering misconceptions about God, they can be laid to rest as Jesus gives us a true picture of God. Jesus is the best and fullest revelation of God's character. In John 14:8-10, Phillip, one of his disciples said to Jesus, "show us the Father" and Jesus answered, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I'd been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the father. How can you say show us the father? Don't you believe that I am in the father and the father is in me?"

The character of God, which is seen in creation and in relationship to Israel is fully described in the person of Jesus. Above all Jesus shows us the love and grace of God. In the book of Hebrews we are told:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being,

Hebrew 1:3

As God, he is able to live the perfect human life. He lived in trusting loving partnership with God. As a human he becomes our representative, proving himself faithful where we were not. Jesus becomes the solution for each of our problems. He deals with our separation, slavery and death.

Jesus renews relationship through forgiveness.

Our sinful rebellion has earned us judgment and shame. We have spoiled our relationship with God and cannot repair it with our own efforts. As contributors to the problem we are subject to God's justice.

No amount of goodness can make up for past failures. If you betray a friend and spoil a relationship the only way to move forward is through forgiveness. The offended party has to be willing to bear the cost of the offense. The Bible teaches that Jesus' death on the cross is God's way of bearing the cost and providing forgiveness. We can understand this through many different metaphors.

Consider a financial debt. Imagine that you damaged someone's property, like an expensive car, and you were not able to afford the cost of replacing it. Imagine further that the owner was willing to forgive you for the damage. This forgiveness comes at a great expense, because forgiveness does not repair the car. The owner would have to spend the money to restore the damage. In his death, Jesus pays the price of our sinful damage.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

2 Corinthians 8:9

Of course our problem is not financial, it is relational. Some damage cannot be fixed with money. The consequence of our rejection of God is separation from God. It is similar to what happens when we are unfaithful to a partner except that separation from God is far worse than separation from another human.

It is understood that the death of Jesus on our behalf is his willing substitution whereby he experiences the consequence of our sin and therefore resolves the need for justice. In theological terms this is called atonement, payment given to cover guilt. The thought is that we deserved to be separated from God but instead Jesus was separated as our representative. Living a perfect life, he did not deserve to be forsaken by God, however he became our substitute and paid our penalty.

There is a good illustration from the game of hockey. According to the rules of the game there are many actions that will result in a penalty. For example hitting someone with your stick could draw a slashing or high-sticking penalty. The usual consequence is that the player must sit in the penalty box for two minutes while his team plays shorthanded. There is an interesting situation however when the goaltender earns a penalty. Instead of taking him out of the net, the coach designates a substitute. One of the other players on the ice at the time of the penalty serves as a representative for the goaltender and sits in the box on his behalf. An innocent teammate suffers the punishment of the guilty goaltender.

In a similar way Jesus becomes our designated representative and experiences the penalty that we deserved. Our penalty is separation from God. At his dying breath Jesus cried out "My God my God why have you forsaken me?" The answer is that he was forsaken because he bore our guilt and our penalty.

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

1 Peter 3:18

Because justice is served by Jesus, we have the opportunity to have a restored relationship with God. The death of Christ becomes the source of forgiveness. So Jesus resolves our separation from God in a way that perfectly aligns with God's justice and grace. Justice is served because the penalty is paid. But it is a gift of grace because God himself pays the price.

It is common for Christians to say that we are saved by grace. What this means is that we did not deserve to be forgiven but Christ willingly sacrificed himself for us.

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Ephesians 2:4-5

This is why the cross is the most common symbol within Christianity. Although it looks back on the terrible death of Jesus, it reminds us that his death is the source of our forgiveness and has resolved our separation from God. Because of him we are restored into the family and can be called children of God.

Jesus brings life through resurrection

Separation from God is only one of our problems. We also need an answer to death. The death of Christ would have no lasting significance apart from the resurrection. The resurrection not only confirms that God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin, but it also shows us that he has conquered death. Earlier we

understood from Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death but this verse of scripture goes on to say that "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

On the third day after his death on the cross Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and appeared to his disciples on numerous occasions. The resurrection is the best explanation as to why the early followers of Jesus were willing to spend their lives spreading the news despite opposition and persecution even unto death. They met the risen Jesus and were forever transformed.

The significance of the resurrection is that it offers us hope for life beyond the grave. If our sinful rejection of God has led to spiritual death then Christ's resurrection has opened the door to eternal life.

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

1 Corinthians 15:21–23

The concept of first fruits is associated with a wider harvest. The Hebrew people would make an offering to God from the very first portions of the harvest which would act as a confident expectation of the fullness of the harvest. The resurrection of Jesus is our confidence that we too will be brought in to God's presence. Because of his resurrection we need no longer fear death.

Jesus renews our purpose through Spirit and Truth.

The good work of Jesus is incredibly important for our future, but is equally important to our present life on earth. Yes we will receive eternal life and be welcomed into the presence of God, but

it is also true that we live with God now and have renewed purpose.

Our rejection of God has led to many problems and conflicts in this world. And although the Bible makes it clear that this world cannot be perfected, it also teaches that it should not be abandoned.

Christians hold to a tension. They recognize that this world requires transformation and they hold out hope for a new heaven and new earth where God will set all things right. At the same time, in unity with God's original plan for creation, it is understood that we are called to work for the good in this present world.

We can see this in the words of the prophets to the people of Israel who were taken captive to Babylon. Although they were not living in their homeland and did not expect to return for generations, they were instructed to live for the good of the city.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

Jeremiah 29:4–7

In a similar way, Jesus invites us to live for the good of this world as we await the glory of our true eternal home. Part of our job is to spread the news of hope in Christ and invite all nations to become followers of Jesus. But our partnership with Jesus is not merely to

carry his message but also to reflect his character and love as he loved.

This is where the life of Christ becomes instructive for the Christian. Jesus did not just die and rise again, he lived, served and taught. As a risen saviour Jesus is more than a teacher, but he is certainly not less. The core message of Christ is not a message of religious performance, but rather of love.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34–35

But Jesus also knew that we needed more than good teaching. Because the power of sin remains within us and within the world, we need a source of power that is stronger than rules and principles. Sin still has a power to enslave us. For this reason Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to live within each believer. The Holy Spirit is God's active power. If the Father is the one who initiates and the son is the one who accomplishes, then the Spirit is the one who makes it come alive in each of us.

The Holy Spirit illuminates God's truth through the Bible which he inspired. The Holy Spirit gives gifts and abilities to the followers of Jesus so that they can accomplish God's will in this world. The Holy Spirit develops our character to reflect the God we serve.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit we renew our partnership with God and work for his good in this world by helping others come to know Jesus and by doing good works.

Our Response

So far we have been focusing on God's role in resolving separation, slavery and death. First and foremost this is a work of God from beginning to end. Just as he initiated creation, in grace he has initiated the pathway of salvation. Yet from beginning to end there is a need for humanity to respond to God's leading. It was the same for Adam and Eve, for Abraham and Israel and for us. Broadly speaking our response is love and trust. It has always been about relationship and all relationships are built on a foundation of love and trust. This is the pattern of covenant. God makes gracious promises and we respond in love and trust. Let's examine this a little more closely and consider what this would look like in our lives.

Repentance and Humility

Because we need to rebuild our broken relationship with God, we need to begin with humility and repentance. If you are unfaithful or cause offense, the only way to restoration is to admit what you have done and say you're sorry. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we know that God is willing to forgive, but reconciliation is a two-way street. We have a part to play.

Repentance means to change your mind. It means to turn your life from one direction and go in the opposite direction. Whereas our sinful nature produces within us pride, we must humble ourselves and return to God.

Jesus taught about the importance of repentance in many of his teachings. One of the best examples is the story of the prodigal son which can be found in Luke chapter 15. In this story a younger son rejects his father and wastes his inheritance. Eventually he falls

upon hard times in a faraway land and ends up feeding pigs. At this point he has a change of mind and desires to return to his father. He says, "I will set out and go back to my father and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'" This son recognizes that he is not worthy, but he is willing to acknowledge his fault and return home.

The best part of this story is that the father gladly welcomes him home with a hug and a party. This is exactly what we receive when we are willing to humble ourselves and repent. God does not make us grovel, he welcomes us gladly. We know this is true because Jesus was willing to sacrifice himself for us. There is no question that God loves us and wants a relationship with us.

The story of the prodigal son who returns home gives us some further insight because there is another character in the story. There is an older brother who never left home or wasted his money. This older brother is angry that the younger son is received back into the family. The father also goes to him and affirms love for his older son but we are left wondering if this older son will respond.

This older son warns us about the danger of pride and self-righteousness. The people who are least likely to turn to God are those who think that they have done nothing wrong. It is possible to be moral and religious and still have a heart that rejects God. If you are trusting in your own ability to be good then you will certainly be disappointed. The Bible teaches that no one can be good enough to earn their favor with God. We must receive our right standing with God as a gift. If we work really hard to be good and think that our efforts are enough, then we know nothing of humility and the Bible teaches us that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.

Faith

Faith is another word for trust and it goes hand in hand with humility and repentance. If the first step is to recognize one's need for God, then the next step is to trust that you will be received by God. Faith is the glad acceptance of all that Christ has done on our behalf. It involves believing that his death and resurrection provide forgiveness and life. The Bible often refers to this as believing in Jesus. Our faith must be focused on Jesus.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

When the Bible uses this language of believing in Jesus, it is talking about something more substantial than mental acceptance. It's not about just having accurate thinking, it is more about trust and dependence.

My favorite illustration which shows how faith is more than belief is the story of Blondin the tight rope walker which is part of Alpha series. The story tells of a tight rope walker who performs his act high above Niagara Falls. After doing many acrobatic stunts on the tight rope, such as wheeling a sack of potatoes across in a wheelbarrow, Blondin approaches the enthusiastic crowd and asks, "do you believe I could take a person across in this wheelbarrow?" Many in the crowd cheer and say that they believe he could do it. To this, Blondin asks for volunteers to get in the wheelbarrow. At this moment the crowd which finds it easy to believe that it can be done is unwilling to act on that belief and put their life in his hands.

Jesus is looking for people who will act on their belief. There must be a willingness to risk one's life and death on Christ. We must

gladly accept that his death and resurrection are our hope for a right relationship with God and eternal life. So faith is more than a mental belief, it is a willingness to trust and act on that trust even in the context of uncertainty and doubt.

Yes faith is a risk. There is always a measure of uncertainty and doubt. Our finite minds are not capable of knowing the truth with full clarity. The good news is we do not have to have perfectly accurate theology or certain knowledge in order to trust. Trust is more of an act of the will than it is a decision of the mind. If you are unsure about the reasonableness of faith, you may wish to read my booklet called "Is faith Reasonable?"

One thing for sure is that faith is the opposite of earning. Faith means receiving what God has done for you, not achieving salvation through your good deeds. The good we do must be a celebration of God's love and not a way to put him in our debt. This is one of the main misconceptions about Christianity. We do not gain favor with God by our moral excellence or religious devotion. Our favor with God is given by grace and accepted by faith. Faith is not bringing something to God for validation, but rather going to him with empty hands recognizing that our only hope is to receive his mercy and grace.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2:8–9

So again faith goes hand in hand with humility and repentance. First we must give up our own self-reliance and pride and secondly we must receive what Christ offers us.

Jesus is Lord

Faith is not merely backward looking. It doesn't just look at the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus but it also looks to an ongoing relationship with Christ. Ultimately Christianity is about accepting Jesus Christ as our rightful Lord. He is our teacher, our leader, our king and master.

Jesus is a wonderful Lord. He is compassionate and he loves sacrificially. He is full of mercy and is willing to serve. Yet he is still our authority and he calls us to follow him. To have faith in Jesus is to follow him. This is what Jesus called us to do.

Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

Mark 8:34–36

To deny oneself is to give up the right to control one's life. It is to set aside selfishness. One cannot merely have confidence in the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection, they must also give their life to Christ. Humility and faith are not one time decisions but are an ongoing lifestyle. One must continue to humble themselves before Christ and trust his leadership.

To accept the lordship of Jesus, one must also be willing to publicly confess his name. This is the logic of baptism whereby a person publicly identifies with Jesus and accepts his death and resurrection as hope for forgiveness and eternal life. The going under the water and coming back up out of the water is a symbolic union with the death and resurrection of Christ. Christians are

baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and therefore publicly identify with God. The act of baptism is not itself the moment of salvation, but rather is a celebration of new life with God that comes through faith.

When the scriptures talk about being saved they recognize the importance of confessing Jesus as Lord while at the same time believing truly within the heart.

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Romans 10:9–10

These two elements of faith are important. There must be a genuine belief in one's heart and also a willingness to live out and show one's faith by confessing Jesus as Lord.

This lived out faith will also be evidenced in good works. While we do not earn our favor with God through our goodness, this does not mean that we no longer need to obey God or live according to his will. Instead, good works become our celebration of God's love. We pursue goodness not as a bargaining chip with God, but because Jesus is our Lord whom we love.

Remember that we were made for relationship with God and therefore our salvation and restoration will be a relationship with God. Christianity is about how Jesus Christ has done the work to restore what was intended in creation. He opens the way for us to have a relationship with God. He provides the basis for life eternal. He renews our partnership with God as we follow him as Lord.

Begin with Prayer

Perhaps you are convinced and would like to begin a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. First and foremost this needs to be a change of heart. There needs to be humility, repentance, faith and acceptance of Jesus as Lord. If this is the desire of your heart then a good place to begin is to talk to God in prayer.

There is no special technique to prayer. There are no required words or format. The most important ingredient is an honest heart. Simply address God in conversation as if you are talking to a real person. If you are unsure about how to pray perhaps you would find this sample prayer helpful. Read this over and think about it and if it represents the desire of your heart then put it into your own words and address it to God.

Dear God,

Thank you for this good news about your love for me and the life you have for me. I accept your gift of forgiveness and life that was provided for me through the death and resurrection of Jesus. I trust in Jesus to be my Lord, my Leader, my Master, and my Teacher. I'm sorry for my sins, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I no longer want to be separate from you, or ignore you, or live for any purpose other than you. I want to partner with you and live with you. Amen.

If this prayer represents your heart then welcome to the family of God. You have been forgiven. You have been given eternal life. You have received the Holy Spirit. You have begun a new life following Jesus.

If you still need time to think things through and find answers to your questions, that is all right. This is a serious life-changing decision and should not be taken lightly. Don't stop thinking and searching and praying, but rather take the time to talk with Christians and find out more about Jesus.

This booklet is a quick introduction but it would be better for you to learn more about Jesus through reading one of his biographies. The first four books of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are a good place to get to know the person of Jesus and the story of his death and resurrection.

Moving Forward

If you have taken the step of faith to trust Christ and become a follower there are several things that you should consider as next steps.

1. Find a community of faith. It's important to meet together with other Christians to learn about the scriptures and find supportive relationships. It is good to join in regular worship services at a local church but it's also important to meet in smaller groups where you can ask questions and build friendships.
2. Get baptized. Talk with a pastor about getting baptized. This is an import way to affirm your faith in Christ.
3. Continue to grow. Do not stop the learning process. Read the Bible, study with other Christians. Serve others. Continue to pray.

Emmanuel offers small groups and mentorships which can help you grow in your life with God.

This booklet was written by Pastor David Dawson. He would be glad to meet with you and discuss this further. You can contact him through Emmanuel Baptist church and the contact information on the back cover of this book.

Look for his other booklets

Is Faith Reasonable?

Understanding the Bible

Baptism: Celebrating New Life With God

Continuing Life with God



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