WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

MICHAEL S. HEISER


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WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

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BLIND SPOT
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Dedication

To all those beginning their journey of faith in Jesus, and to those who began it long ago, but feel like they're still at the same place.

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ABBREVIATIONS OF THE NAMES OF THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE (WHERE NECESSARY)

OLD TESTAMENT

Gen (Genesis)
Exod (Exodus)
Lev (Leviticus)
Num (Numbers)
Deut (Deuteronomy)
Josh (Joshua)
Judg (Judges)
Ruth
1-2 Sam (1-2 Samuel)
1-2 Kings
1-2 Chron (1-2 Chronicles)
Ezra
Neh (Nehemiah)
Esther
Job
Psa (Psalms)
Prov (Proverbs)
Eccles (Ecclesiastes)
Song (Song of Solomon)
Isa (Isaiah)
Jer (Jeremiah)
Lam (Lamentations)
Ezek (Ezekiel)
Dan (Daniel)
Hos (Hosea)
Joel
Amos
Obad (Obadiah)

Jon (Jonah)
Mic (Micah)
Nahum
Hab (Habakkuk)
Zeph (Zephaniah)
Hag (Haggai)
Zech (Zechariah)
Mal (Malachi)

NEW TESTAMENT

Matt (Matthew)
Mark
Luke
John
Acts
Rom (Romans)
1-2 Cor (1-2 Corinthians)
Gal (Galatians)
Eph (Ephesians)
Phil (Philippians)
Col (Colossians)
1-2 Thess (1-2 Thessalonians)
1-2 Tim (1-2 Timothy)
Tit (Titus)
Philem (Philemon)
Heb (Hebrews)
James
1-2 Pet (1-2 Peter)
1-2-3 John
Jude
Rev (Revelation)

PREFACE—PLEASE DON'T SKIP THIS

I hope that caught your attention. I know . . . prefaces are the reading equivalent to waiting in line (for anything), watching C-Span, and being stuck in traffic. I won't promise this one will be a thrill, but it's important.

This book is an introduction to what the Bible is *really* about—God's love, how God wants you to have eternal life with him, and how God wants you to help others learn about those first two items. Pretty simple . . . but likely *not* what you're used to in that regard. This isn't your run-of-the-mill "Christianity 101" book. It will cover some things you've not heard before, and I'll have a bit of a different angle for a lot that might be familiar.

I have two kinds of readers in mind. The first is someone who has very recently come to faith in Jesus. If that's you, you're probably already a little intimidated by the Bible. There's a lot in it that sounds strange and isn't easy to understand. Trust me, I know how you feel. When I came to believe in Jesus as a teenager I knew next to nothing about the Bible. I had heard of Jesus, Noah, and Adam and Eve. That was it. This is a book I wish someone had handed me right after I embraced the gospel. It would have helped me make

sense of the story of the Bible and some pretty important concepts. I believe it will do that for you.

The second reader I have in view is the person who has known Jesus for a while, but who somehow feels "stuck." You believe in Jesus, you've been engaged in church for a while (maybe a long time). But you have this nagging sense that there must be more to it all—there just has to be more to the Bible than what you've picked up on to this point. You feel a little lost when it comes to what it really means to follow Jesus. There has to be more to that than Sunday worship, hanging out with Christian friends, and getting involved in groups at church. I want you to know that your instincts are correct. This book will help you move forward.

It may sound contradictory, but this book aims to introduce (or perhaps re-introduce) some basic but important ideas to smart people. I always assume my readers are intelligent. For some of you, this book will help you re-learn some things in fresh ways. For others, just beginning, we all have to start somewhere. So here we are.

I am hoping this book prepares readers to move on to some other books I have written. After you finish this book, I recommend moving on to *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the Unseen World—And Why It Matters*. For English readers that book is available online, either through Amazon.com or the publisher, Lexham Press. There are also a number of free videos online where I discuss some of the important concepts in this book. For readers of other languages, that book is free for download at https://www.miqlat.org/translations-of-supernatural.htm.

After reading *Supernatural* I hope readers graduate to several other books I've written that demonstrate there's a lot more to learn about the Bible and God than what you might hear in church: *I Dare You Not to Bore Me with the Bible*; *The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms*; and *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible.*

I'm also hoping you'll all become listeners to my *Naked Bible Podcast.* The name reflects my goal of giving listeners biblical content in its own, original ancient context, free from modern denominational filters and assumptions based on modern Western paradigms. I care only about what the biblical text, understood in its own context, can sustain—not what traditions have said about the text. Every month hundreds of thousands of listeners learn to read the Bible again for the first time. The thrill of discovery is something every believer should experience with regularity. That's why I do what I do.

Thanks for reading this!

INTRODUCTION

What does God want?

Sounds like a simple question, but if you give it a bit of thought, it's really not.

Why? Well, for starters, you have to know who's asking the question. People will ask it for a lot of different reasons. Is it a cry of anger from someone in pain? Perhaps it's a barely audible whisper that surfaces from deep sadness. Is the motivation curiosity? Or is it just prompted by the desire to reflect and think deep thoughts? It's not difficult to see that giving the right answer depends on *why* the question is being asked.

Since I'm the one asking the question, it's easy to clear that up. But first let me tell you what *isn't* motivating me. I'm not asking the question because I don't know the answer. I do. In fact, I know the answer for everyone, at least in terms of the answer God himself would give with respect to all of us. And that's precisely how I'm asking it. I'm asking it to help you think about some important things. When I ask, "What does God want?" I'm really asking: *What does God want when it comes to every person in the human race*? What does he want when it comes to me and my life and to you and your life?

Before I get to the answer, it's pretty obvious that the question is a religious one. Questions about God naturally get filed in that folder. I've raised the question and will answer it because I'm inter-ested in God. Most people still are, though they aren't interested in church. That's fine, since you don't need the latter to talk about the former. I'm not a pastor or priest, but I've made a career out of studying the Bible (yes, that's actually possible). So since I'm the one asking, my answer is going to be a biblical one. That narrows the focus a bit more. My goal will be to explain how the Bible would answer the question "What does God want?"

Now for the answer. It's simple. He wants *you*.
That might surprise you. You may doubt it. That's okay. But it's the right answer. To be honest, though, it isn't *enough* of an answer. You can't get a sense of how amazing and profound the answer is by just that one sentence. You need some context to appreciate how much love is behind it. There's actually a long, remarkable *story* behind the answer.

Since that's the case, this book is not only about what God wants, but it's about *things God wants you to know*. Yes, he wants *you*, but for you to appreciate that and (hopefully) feel the same way about God, you need a little context.

That, of course, is my job. We'll start with God's story. There's a lot of tragedy in it, but none of that ever changed God's mind about you (or me, thankfully). Once I'm done telling the story (it's not the whole book, so if you're not an avid reader, you're in luck) I'll drill down on some parts of the story that are especially important. But if you only read the story section, you'll get the answer to the question we started with. I'm guessing, though, that you'll want to keep going. I hope you do. It's good stuff.

Before we jump in, I have one disclaimer. If you've spent a lot of your life in church, you might think you already know the story. You certainly know parts of it, but I can guarantee there will be

some surprises. Unfortunately, the thing that most often gets in the way of the wonder of the story is religion. Sometimes church and denominational preferences become more important than the story. That's not the case here.

Even though I'm assuming some readers are familiar with the Bible, I'm confident you're going to encounter new truths and new ways to think about old truths. And if you've never been in a church or heard much about the Bible, you're the perfect reader. There's nothing to unlearn or re-learn. It's all fresh. Either way, I think you're going to experience the thrill of discovering what God wants—and why.

PART I

THE STORY

CHAPTER ONE

GOD WANTED A FAMILY

The earliest thought I had about God was not an invisible dad in the sky. God was a creator, a distant power. I presumed he knew about me and everyone else, but I had no idea what he was thinking (or if he was thinking) about me or the other people in the world. I didn't doubt he was there—not like a real presence in the room sort of thing. Instead, God was more or less a detached observer whose attention I might get from time to time (maybe when I was in trouble). I didn't think of God as out to get me, mind you, or that he didn't like me. For my part, I accepted that God was real, and I had no reason to think he was hostile. But that was it. As the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind.

I had a lot to learn about God. Since I wasn't seeking him I assumed he wasn't seeking me. If someone had asked me, I think I would have said God had better things to do. I would have presumed that I wasn't doing anything (good or bad) that deserved much attention.

I was wrong. God *was* seeking me. I just didn't know it. I know now that God sought me because it's his nature to seek us. He's *committed* to us.

How do we know these things about God? (That's a question I'm going to ask more than once, so look for it!) Let's start with ourselves as an analogy. It's normal—part of our nature—to care about the things we make, especially if they required serious effort or were the result of concerted thought. We are naturally going to be angry or resentful when someone mocks, belittles, destroys, or claims as theirs something *we* made, achieved, or thought of first. *Not* feeling those things would be abnormal.

We feel this way because of who we are by default. We're self-aware. All of us have an inner life, the life of the mind. We use our intelligence for what we want and will bring us pleasure, not what will bring us pain and loss. We act intentionally, not randomly or without purpose. We are guided by our rationality and intuition.

Illustrations of why all this is on target are numerous. Even the things we think have the least significance are done intentionally, guided by some point of reason. We brush our teeth because we don't want cavities or bad breath. We get up because we want to keep our job (or even better, because we have something fun to do). We turn left instead of right because we have a place to go. On those occasions when we might do something that could be called irrational (like flaming someone on social media who may never see it or care), it's still because we want some desired outcome (to feel superior or "teach them a lesson"). And even when we do something unpleasant it's with the thought that it'll be good for us in some way. Why else go on a diet? We are by nature purposeful, not purposeless, beings.

Again, the opposite of these things would signal a psychological or emotional anomaly.

The God of the Bible shares this profile. God does what he does to *enjoy* what he's done. God didn't create humanity because he lacked something. He wasn't lonely, as though he was incomplete or needed company. God needs nothing because . . . well . . . he's God. He created things to enjoy the work of his own hands, so to speak. And the things he cares about most are those he made to

be like him, "in his own image" as the Bible says (Gen 1:26). That would be you and me.

Where Our Story Begins

Our story—the story of why God wants us—begins with the biblical idea that God is our Maker. Although we can't completely comprehend that, the bottom line is that we're here because God wanted us here. God doesn't act randomly. He acts with purpose. When he created humankind he wasn't trying to fill some deficiency in himself. Given the fact that he didn't need us but still made us, there's only one rational explanation for why he created us. God wanted us to exist in order to enjoy us (and to have us enjoy him in return).

Because God created us, the Bible refers to him as our "Father" and people from Adam onward as his children.[1] That's why the Bible uses the language of family to describe God and his relationship to us. That's no coincidence.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. To really understand the context for family-centered language in the Bible, we need to go back to the time before God made the earth and the human race. It may surprise you, but God wasn't alone then, either. That's another reason why we can be sure he didn't create us to heal his own loneliness.

The Bible tells us that before God created us he had already created other intelligent beings. The Bible calls them "sons of God." We call them angels. The Old Testament book of Job tells us that the sons of God "shouted for joy" when God laid the foundations of the earth (Job 38:4-7). They were already present and watching.

Think about the phrase: "sons of God." The same Hebrew term translated "sons" can also be translated more inclusively as "children."[2] What does a phrase like "children of God" imply?

---

1. Isa 63:16; 64:8; Luke 3:38; Acts 17:28-29; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3.
2. Gen 3:16; 30:26; 31:43.

Family.

"Children" is a term you'd use when family is the subject of conversation. In the case of Job 38:4-7, the family is a heavenly or supernatural one. God is Father to the intelligent beings he creates in the unseen realm.

The fact that God already had a supernatural family helps us understand his motivation for the creation of Adam and Eve, the first humans in the Genesis story. God wanted a *human* family in addition to his supernatural family. Incredibly, the story of Eden tells us God wanted his two families to live together in his presence. This means that, just like the angels, humans were originally created fit for the presence of God himself.

But how do we know all that? (There I go again). Let's take a look.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, begins with creation. God had done a lot of creating by the time the story gets to people (Adam and Eve). The story unfolds with God creating plants, insects, flying creatures, and land animals. None of those creatures was capable of having a relationship with God. They could not converse with God. They could not share their thoughts with God or express their appreciation to him. Members of a family relate to one another—they interact on an intellectual and emotional level. They form companionship bonds. As spectacular as plants and animals are, they couldn't play the role of children. They weren't family. That's what God really wanted. He needed to create something like himself.

IMAGERS OF GOD

After God had filled the earth with all kinds of plants and animals, he still had work to do. God decided to fashion new creatures "in his image" and "in his likeness" (Gen 1:27). They would be his earthly family.

The "image of God" is an important concept in the Bible. Human beings were created to be like God. Think of the "image"

of God as a verb and you're on the right track to understanding the idea. We were created to *image* God, to be his *imagers*—to represent him.

What does it mean to image God? Genesis 1:27-28 gives us the answer:

> So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

God could have taken care of his world just fine. He's God. Nothing is beyond his ability. But instead God created an earthly family. His children would assume his role in managing and maintaining his creation. They would be understudies and partners. Imaging God means being God's representation on earth. God tasked humans with doing a job he could just as well have done himself. But he wanted his children to participate. God's business would be family business. Eden was not merely God's home; it was God's home office. We were created to be God's co-workers.

God made sure the people he made could do the job of imaging him on earth. He shared his attributes (his qualities and abilities) with them—things like intelligence and creativity. The Bible tells us that humans are a lesser version of who God is. He made us to be like him so we could participate with him as co-rulers and co-caretakers in his new world.

Imaging God is an important concept for several reasons. It gives each of us a secure, profound identity. It was God's original desire that every human being would be his child and partner. *That* is how God looks at people. It's also how we ought to think of people. God wants every one of us to consider each person a sibling. We all have the same status as imagers of God whom God wants

in his family. Racism, violence, manipulation, and coercion were not part of God's design for humanity. They are the evil result of rebellion and sin. God hates what sin has done to people *he loves*. That's something we need to remember when we think about our own moral failures and those of others.

Imaging God also gives us purpose. We have a mission. Every person, no matter how small or weak or short-lived has some role to play in someone else's life. Every task we set our mind to that honors God and our fellow imagers becomes a *spiritual* calling. In God's mind, the role of a pastor, minister, or priest is not superior to any other calling. How we live either blesses fellow imagers, reminding them of what life and harmony with God must surely be like, or curses them. What we do matters—and most of the time in small, unspectacular ways.

All of this is why I answered my opening question the way I did. What does God want? He wants you. He wants a family. He wants co-workers. He wants you to know who you are and why your life has value to him.

But we're just getting started. There's a lot more to the story. Life in our world—and perhaps even in our own house—doesn't conform to God's vision. Something happened to ruin it all. The heartache would be so great that God *almost* decided to give up on humanity.

CHAPTER TWO

GOD STILL WANTED A FAMILY

In the last chapter I made the point that God equipped people to image him on earth. He did that by sharing his attributes (his qualities and abilities) with them. As wonderful as that was (and is), it's where things get interesting—and scary. One of God's qualities is freedom—what we often call free will. If you've ever wondered why there's evil in the world, here's the Bible's answer.

REBELLION #1

When God made the decision to share his attributes with his children, he knew what it meant. God knows everything, so he understood clearly what would happen. God had made the same decision earlier with the heavenly family he had created. They have abilities like intelligence and freedom, too. They got those gifts from their Creator.

Sooner or later God knew that his gifts would be either misused or abused. He knew full well that, though his children (in the spiritual world and on earth) were like him, *they were not him.* They were *less* than him. They were imperfect, whereas he is perfect.

At some point one (or more) of his children would either make a horrible mistake or act in thoughtless self-interest, rebelling against something God wanted done (or not done).

That's precisely what happened in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve rebelled. They violated God's command to not eat from one of the trees in the garden. They sinned and lost eternal life in God's presence. Every human born thereafter was born outside Eden, estranged from God. The apostle Paul summed it up well: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).

That tragedy was brought on by an even earlier rebellion. One of God's supernatural children decided to dishonor God's decision to have a human family by tempting Eve, hoping God would destroy her and Adam. He came to Eve in the form of a serpent (Gen 3:1-7). The Bible refers to the serpent as Satan and the Devil (Rev 12:9). He succeeded in getting Eve to sin, but failed when it came to getting rid of humanity permanently.

There are some deep truths here, the first of which answers a question everyone asks at some point in life: Why is there evil in the world? Evil exists in the world because God decided he wanted to create beings like himself. I don't mean that God has an evil side. Rather, I mean that God rejected the idea of creating humans as robots or pre-programmed computers made of flesh.

That last point is important. Our likeness to him had to be authentic. Without the genuine freedom to make real decisions we simply would not be like God. God is no robot, and we were made to be like him. Without genuine free will, we cannot authentically love God or obey God. If decisions are pre-programmed, they aren't really decisions. For decisions like love and obedience to be authentic, they must be made against a truly possible alternative.

The result of all this is that evil exists because people abuse God's wonderful gift of freedom and use it for self-gratification, revenge, and the mirage of autonomy. This abuse began in Eden.

But God was not taken by surprise. He had anticipated evil. He foresaw what would happen and planned accordingly. God did not

destroy his human children for their rebellion. Instead, he would forgive and redeem them. The Bible makes it clear that God saw what was coming and had a plan of forgiveness and salvation in place before the rebellion even happened—from "the foundation of the world" to be precise (Eph 1:4; Heb 9:26-10:7; 1 Pet 1:20).

The plan of salvation would ultimately require God becoming a man. We'll get to that part of the story soon enough. But long before that climactic event there was a price to pay for what happened in Eden. God banished Adam and Eve (and, therefore, their descendants) from his presence. Eden was no more. Instead of eternal life with God their father, humanity would now look forward to death (Rom 5:12). That's what separation from the source of life—God—ultimately costs.

In effect, God kicked his children out of his house. But that was a better outcome than what the serpent had hoped for—human destruction. God wasn't giving up on his plan to have a human family, but rebellion had a cost. God also punished Satan. Having brought death into God's world he became lord of the realm of the dead, what would later become known as hell.

NO BACKUP PLAN

You might wonder at this point why God *didn't* just scrap the whole plan for having a human family. After all, God allowed free will, knowing it would lead to sin and thousands of years of human misery in the form of violence, neglect, selfishness, and a host of other awful things humans are capable of inflicting on one another. Perhaps your own suffering, or the suffering you see all around you, might even make you wish God had just destroyed everything.

Believe it or not, God understands that feeling. He sees the evils you see and infinitely more. None of it is the way he wanted things. But, you say, *he's God*—can't he just overrule all of it? It's not that simple. Think about it. God can only eliminate evil in our world if he eliminates all the ones who do evil. In other words, God can

only end evil if he wipes out all of us. Everyone sins (Rom 3:10-12) and, like the Bible says, "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). So sure, God *could* do that. But he doesn't. He loves humanity too much for that to be an option.

All this boils down to an amazing truth: While God knew what making us like him would lead to, *the result was preferable to not having a human family at all.* God sees the sin and misery in our world and knows its cause. It hurts him. God is so consumed with love for his human children that he will not turn away from his original ambition. There's no plan B. There is only Plan A. Despite foreseeing the rebellion that would come in Eden and all the failures and sins that would follow—including our own—God still longs for a human family.

What happened in Eden was only the beginning of the story. God had kicked Adam and Eve out of his house (Gen 3:22-24). He cursed the serpent (Gen 3:14-15) and cast him away from his presence (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:16). The message was forceful and simple: rebellion would be punished. You'd think everyone would get the message. Not so. Things got even worse.

REBELLION #2

You may have heard somewhere along the way that the Bible teaches the world has so much evil in it because of humanity's fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. That's only partially true. After the tragedy of Eden there were two more episodes that plunged humanity further into the depths of depravity and chaos.

The first of these is described in Genesis 6:1-4, arguably one of the stranger incidents in the entire Bible. (Trust me, I've written whole books on it). The story is about how some of God's supernatural children (the "sons of God") wanted to imitate God by producing their own human children to image *themselves.* They decided to use human women (the "daughters of man") for that purpose. This made them rivals to God, their own heavenly father.

Rather than be happy with God's desire to have humans become members of their family, they decided they wanted to be overlords of their own humans. That wasn't what God had in mind. God wanted a family, not slaves.

These "angels that sinned" (2 Pet 2:4) transgressed the boundary between heaven and earth. They "did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling" (Jude 6). God sent them to hell as a result (2 Pet 2:4-5; Jude 6), but the deed was done, and it had disastrous consequences. Look at the two verses that follow the Bible's recounting of this rebellion:

> The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Gen 6:5-6)

Think about that. *Every* intention in *everyone's* heart was *only* evil *continually.* God *regretted* he had made humanity; the thought *grieved* him.

This is the very definition of depravity and the sorrow it brings. The first supernatural rebellion led to humanity losing everlasting life with God (which is bad enough). This rebellion took the effects of sin to another level, accelerating human self-destruction. God felt deep remorse over the way things had turned out. Humanity had been permanently damaged.

The Bible tells us that God could see no other solution but to send the flood to wipe out humanity (Gen 6:17). It's important to notice that the flood story never says God was angry. It only says he was heart-stricken over what was going on. God had decided to give humans freedom. He couldn't take it away since doing so would mean they would no longer be like him—they'd no longer be truly human. The only choice was to start over and put an end to what the rebellious sons of God had caused.

Only one man was said to be righteous in God's eyes—Noah (Gen 6:9). At least there was one. God would take it. He would move ahead with his plan to have a human family.

God told Noah to build an ark (a large ship) so that he, his family, and multitudes of animals would survive. But God still held out hope that, as deep as human depravity had become, that his human children could be with him. Mercifully, he gave Noah 120 years to prepare for the flood (Gen 6:3) and tell people what was going to happen so they could turn from their depravity and be forgiven (2 Pet 2:5).

In the end, people wouldn't listen. They refused God's gracious warning. Once again, God's children turned their backs to him, as they were free to do. Is it any wonder God's heart was so broken? At least there was Noah and his family. After the flood God repeated the original commands he had given to Adam and Eve ("Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"; Gen 9:1). God was starting over with them. He made a covenant with Noah that extended to all humankind (Gen 9:8-17). A covenant is a promise or pledge. This covenant was one-sided; it was all about God's promise to never destroy humanity (Gen 9:11). Amazingly, God still wanted a human family.

Not as amazing—but still pretty incredible—the abuse of God's goodness would continue. A third rebellion followed the flood. This one would frame the rest of the biblical story, and show, again, God's unconquerable patience and love.

REBELLION #3

Like the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah's flood, you may have heard of the Tower of Babel. If not, that's okay, because even most church-goers don't realize what *really* happened there.

The story of the Tower of Babel is found in Gen 11:1-9. After the flood God wanted Noah's descendants to multiply and spread out over the earth. Like Adam and Eve, they were to be God's

co-workers to maintain creation. Instead of doing that, they gathered at a place called Babel and built a tower to their own glory (Gen 11:1-4).

That's the familiar version of the story, but its real significance is found in two unfamiliar verses in another biblical book. Here they are:

> When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. (Deut 32:8-9)

These two verses tell us that one of the judgments at the Tower of Babel was the division of humankind. Up until this point in the story, God was dealing with humanity as a collective whole. That changed at Babel. Human beings would be segregated by language and geography.

Even worse, God divorced himself from humanity. Fed up with human defiance of his will, God assigned the nations of the earth to other members of his supernatural family—the sons of God. This was a different group than those who transgressed before the flood. God couldn't kick humanity out of his house. He had done that already back in Eden. He had promised not to destroy humanity after the flood (Gen 9:11), so there would be no repeat of that disaster. So what else could he do? He essentially said, "Enough! If you don't want me to be your God, I'll assign you to some of my heavenly assistants."

The fallout of this judgment took many forms. We aren't told how long it took, but the Bible tells us that the supernatural sons of God assigned over the nations did a lousy job. They became so corrupt (Psa 82:1-5) that God had to judge them, too. He would one day take away their immortality and take back the nations (Psa 82:6-8). For our purposes here, God's frustration left him childless

in terms of having a human family. He'd had it. He'd given up. Well . . . not quite.

GOD'S PERSISTENT LOVE

Guess what happened right after the Tower of Babel catastrophe? God appeared to Abraham (originally called Abram), an old man married to a woman (Sarah) who was beyond the age where she could have children. God made a covenant with Abraham. He promised the old man and his wife that they would have a son. God would do a miracle. Their son would be the beginning of a new family for God on earth (Gen 12:1-9; 15:1-6; 18:1-15).

Having allotted humanity to the oversight of members of his heavenly host, God wanted to begin anew with a family of his own with Abraham. Abraham believed God's promises (Gen 15:6). He didn't have to earn God's interest or favor. It was *God* who had chosen Abraham to start over. The relationship between God and Abraham started with God. Abraham believed.

Afterward, the covenant relationship that began with God's call and Abraham's faith was commemorated with the physical sign of circumcision (Gen 17:1-14; Rom 4:1-12). Abraham's entire family followed his example (Gen 17:23). Bearing this sign marked the descendants of Abraham as the people whom God wanted as his family. Circumcision would be a sign to the women of Abraham's lineage, too. Since they were to marry only within the extended tribe, they would be reminded of how their people had been supernaturally created from Abraham and Sarah when they decided to have their own children.

It's important to realize that God's covenant with Abraham was based on belief in God's promises—faith. God didn't approach Abraham because he'd found a man who was a good rule-keeper. Salvation is not based on behavior. We cannot earn our salvation. If that was the case, then God would be in *our* debt by virtue of our performance. He'd *owe* us something in response to our achievement.

Think of how absurd that sounds. Rather, Abraham and his descendants showed their belief in God's promises by observing the sign of the covenant. It was an outward way to show where their loyalty was.

The apostle Paul used Abraham as an example of believing loyalty (Rom 4:1-12). Abraham believed and was accepted by God *before* he obeyed any rules. The rules were about showing he believed. They did not replace belief. Belief (faith) was the one essential thing. Loyalty to that belief—to that God—is something we'll talk about later. Today we call it discipleship. Belief and loyalty are two distinct things. They are related but not interchangeable. The same is true of salvation and discipleship.

Promising Abraham a son (and through him, the start of a new family that would grow into a great nation) was God's second covenant after the disaster of Eden. The first had been with Noah. Both were designed to preserve his dream of having a human family. But these covenants weren't just about God not giving up. They were also about extending the offer of everlasting life to people. God had not given up on humanity. He couldn't stop loving people. God still wanted a human family.

God kept his promise to Abraham. He and Sarah did indeed have a son (Isaac; Gen 17:19-21; 21:1-7). Abraham's extended family would become known as "Israel," the name most frequently used in the Old Testament for God's human family (Gen 32:28; Deut 32:9; Isa 44:1). But what about the people from the other nations, the ones God had assigned to the sons of God after the Tower of Babel rebellion? They are called "Gentiles" in the Bible, a short term that means "not from Israel." And despite what happened at Babel, God did not forget about those people.

Not only would God start over yet again with a new people (Israel), but he told Abraham that his descendants would someday be a blessing to the other nations God had forsaken (Gen 12:3)! Many years later, Jesus, who was from the family of Abraham, would be the particular descendant who would bring all the nations of the world back to God (Gal 3:16-18, 26-29). Before Jesus arrived on

the scene, Gentiles could join God's family by choosing to reject all other gods, believing in Him, and taking the sign of God's covenant.

A lot of time passed between the time of Abraham and Jesus. Israel's own history as "the Lord's portion" (Deut 32:9) wasn't a pretty one. They were God's people, but sadly, perhaps predictably, their loyalty failed. The darkest hour was yet to come.

CHAPTER THREE

GOD WAS BETRAYED BY HIS FAMILY

The history of biblical Israel was a long, meandering affair filled with both triumph and tragedy. God wasn't surprised. He knew what to expect with people. He'd always known what he was dealing with.

WEARING OUT YOUR WELCOME

God let Abraham know that the future of his descendants was going to be difficult. He was honest. He told Abraham, "You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years" (Gen 15:13, NLT). That was the bad news. God provided some hope: "But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen 15:14).

Sure enough the descendants of Abraham, now led by his grandson, Jacob, whose name God changed to "Israel," eventually wound up in Egypt under the thumb of Pharaoh (Exodus 1). They'd gone there with God's approval to avoid a famine (Gen 45:5-11). Where they went wrong was that they didn't return to the land God had given to them after the famine was over. They stuck around in Egypt way too long.

While in Egypt the Israelite nation grew numerically, so much so that Pharaoh got paranoid about being able to stay in charge of the country (Exod 1:8-10). He put them to forced labor and exterminated new babies if they were boys (Exod 1:14-16). But God intervened and made them grow even stronger (Exod 1:8-21).

All told, Israel spent four centuries in Egypt under harsh conditions. Eventually God intervened and preserved the life of a baby boy named Moses. God engineered circumstances so that the baby was raised in Pharaoh's own house, right under his nose (Exod 2:1-10). Moses led a life of privilege but one day committed a capital offense, murdering a man in a fight that began as a defense of a helpless Israelite. He fled Egypt to escape justice.

Moses found a new life in a desert place called Midian. God met him at Mount Sinai in a burning bush, an encounter that would change the history of his people and the world (Exod 3:1-15). God sent Moses back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. He was to demand the release of God's people. God promised to protect Moses and empower him (Exod 3:16-22).

The rest of the story is one of the most famous in the world. Even if you've never read the Bible you've probably heard of it or seen one of the movies about it. God sent plagues against Egypt and its gods when Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go (Exodus 7-12). God used Moses to force the release of multitudes of Israelites from Egyptian bondage. He parted the Red Sea to save them when the Egyptians decided to chase them into the desert to slaughter them (Exodus 13:17 through Exodus 14). The crossing of the Red Sea is far and away the most spectacular miracle of the Bible. But it wasn't showmanship. It was about preserving a people. God wanted his family.

LAW AND LOYALTY

Eventually God brought his people back to the place where he had originally spoken to Moses. There he gave the Israelites his laws—the Ten Commandments. He made a covenant with them.

It's important to realize that Israel was already God's people before the Ten Commandments were given. God had referred to the people as his family when Moses confronted Pharaoh (Exod 3:7, 10; 4:23; 5:1; 6:7; 7:4). The laws weren't about *earning* a place in God's family. Israelites were *already* God's family.

We need to unpack this distinction. It's pretty important. Rather than earning a place in God's family, God gave his people laws to show they *wanted to be in the family.* God's laws were about showing God they weren't going to be disloyal and align themselves with some other god. Being loyal believers would allow God to use the Israelites to minister to all the other nations like "a kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:5-6). God wanted humanity in his family. He was starting with one group—Israel. If they were loyal believers, they would be a blessing to all the other nations (Gen 12:3).

There's one more angle to understanding this covenant. God's laws also weren't about being good enough to make God love them. God already loved Israel (Deut 7:7-8). He had supernaturally enabled the elderly Abraham and Sarah to have a child from which Israel, in time, would come. Having a family was the whole point. God didn't create a list of rules so they'd qualify as family. They *were* his family. God's laws were designed to help his children avoid other gods and live happy, peaceful lives with one another, not to improve God's disposition toward them.

True to form, God would not dismiss their free will. He just asked that they believe in him—who he was, and that he had created them out of love—and forsake all other gods. Any member of Israel could forsake God's love if they wanted. They could choose not to believe. They could choose to worship some other god. As we'll see, many did just that.

Once the Israelites left Mount Sinai (where God gave them the law) God led them in the form of a man (an angel) to the Promised Land (Exod 23:20-23; Judg 2:1). Along the way the people constantly complained about not having enough food and water. God provided (Exodus 15:22-27; 16:1-30). They had to fight for their lives

against lethal enemies in the land. God saved them from destruction (Deuteronomy 2-3; Joshua 11-12; Psa 136:10-24; Acts 13:19).

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

You'd think that after God brought Israel into the land, the Israelites would have felt an overwhelming love for God—that their believing loyalty would be at an all-time high. Not so much. Instead they decided co-existence with evil could work. They refused to drive idolaters (people who worshipped other gods with idols) out of the land. It's like the Israelites knew nothing of the past, how rebellion brings disaster. Their disloyalty and lack of love for God led to this demoralizing scene:

> Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.' But you have not obeyed my voice. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you." (Judg 2:1-3)

God had to judge his people . . . again. He basically said, "I'm out of here. Let's see how you do on your own since you don't want me." We've seen that before. And, as we've also seen before, God's people did very badly without their God being present with them. And since we're rehashing history, God's response also looks familiar—he kept coming back to Israel to lift them out of trouble. We all know people like that. Maybe you're one of them. You stick to helping someone because of love, even to the point that it seems irrational. And if you think about what God was doing, it does seem

insane. But God wants a human family even when he's unwanted. His love defies logic.

The whole biblical book of Judges, from which the scene above was cited, is about a seemingly never-ending cycle of spiritual rebellion, the suffering it brings, crying out to God for help, and God coming back in love. That cycle persisted for a few centuries. It reached a climax of sorts when the people within the nation of Israel demanded that Samuel, a priest and prophet, anoint a king to rule them.

Not surprisingly, the people's choice for a king (Saul) was an unmitigated disaster. You know things aren't going to go well (or ought to know) when your choice for a king has to be dragged out of hiding to take the job (1 Sam 10:22). Eventually God chose David to replace Saul. David was a moral mess, but he was better than Saul. He never showed disloyalty or lack of love for God. He broke a number of God's moral laws, but he repented and never worshipped another god. For that reason God made a covenant promise with David that said only his sons could be legitimate rulers of Israel.

This covenant was about creating a dynasty for David. God would only consider one of his descendants the legitimate king. Sadly, the rest of Israel's history in the Bible's story included a lot of men who had the right lineage that were otherwise unfit to be king. God had to remove a lot of David's descendants because they were disloyal to him, choosing to follow other gods. A descendant of David inheriting the throne was supposed to love God as well as have the right family history. This is why every king was supposed to keep a copy of God's laws with him (Deut 17:18; 2 Kings 11:12). He was to be the most excellent example of a loyal believer.

David's son, Solomon, was the greatest king in Israel's history (if land holdings and wealth are the litmus tests). Sadly, his believing loyalty in the true God wavered. He sacrificed to other gods and had a series of political marriages that brought the worship of other gods into Israel (1 Kings 11:1-8). In other words, Solomon began a cycle of spiritual compromise and rebellion that led to national ruin.

THE FINAL BETRAYAL

After Solomon's death ten of the twelve tribes revolted against his successor (1 Kings 11:41-12:24). The kingdom of Israel was divided into two parts by tribes and geography. God's family was now a broken home, so to speak. It's pretty sad that many kings during the period that ensued had never even seen a copy of God's laws (2 Kings 22:8-13).

The northern part of the divided nation (the ten tribes that rebelled politically) immediately plunged themselves into spiritual rebellion (1 Kings 12:25-33). Instead of showing believing loyalty to the God who had given them the land and supernaturally brought them into existence, most of Israel betrayed God. This is why the prophets who roamed about the countryside preaching during this time compared the spiritual rebellion to "playing the whore" and spiritual adultery. It was a vivid analogy. The southern part of the country (two tribes) went into spiritual rebellion more slowly. But gradual sin is still sin.

Abandoning God never goes well. As the Bible says in one place, "be sure your sin will find you out" (Num 32:23). As he had done at other times, God let his people exercise their freedom and pay the consequences. In 722 B.C. the northern part of the nation was eventually overrun by a people I like to call the Klingons of the Old Testament—the Assyrians. If the Lord of the Rings is more familiar to you than Star Trek, think of the Assyrians as the hordes of Mordor.

I like the analogies because the Assyrians had a well-deserved reputation for cruelty. They scattered the ten tribes all over the ancient world, breaking up families and robbing them of everything they owned. The two remaining tribes in the southern part of the nation were conquered by the Babylonians a little more than a hundred years later (586 B.C.). Thousands of Israelites were forcibly exiled to Babylon.

Let's be honest. If God had forgotten about his people at this point we'd understand. They had rebelled time and time again for

well over a thousand years since the time of Abraham. It's hard to avoid the conclusion they got what they deserved. But that isn't how God works.

Rather than just calling it quits God decided that he *still* wanted a human family. But getting his people—and the rest of humanity—back into his family required a change of tactics. God had made a series of covenants with his people. But people are, obviously, mere humans. They fail . . . *a lot* and with predictable regularity. The rest of humanity had been assigned to supernatural beings (the "sons of God"; Deut 32:8) that had by now become enemies of their creator, the God of Israel. Things were complicated.

God had a two-part solution to all this. When the last children in God's family were on the verge of exile, God prompted two prophets (Jeremiah and Ezekiel) to tell people that they were not completely forgotten. God would make a "new covenant" with his children, one marked by the coming of his Spirit (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:22-28). There was a new day coming.

But the "new day coming" didn't address the question of how God could honor the older covenants without scrapping or changing them. A lot of Israelites rejected God and worshipped other gods. They showed their contempt for him by breaking his laws. This grieved God. He wanted to honor his promises but so many of his children were seduced into worshipping the gods of other nations.

That was the path of death. Remember, because of what had happened in Eden every human being was destined to die and not have eternal life unless they turned to the true God and believed in his love and promises. Far too many Israelites forgot all that. They couldn't just pick and choose gods whenever they felt like it from a spiritual buffet. They had to believe in the true God and keep believing.

The situation was especially problematic when it came to Israel's kings. God had promised David that his heirs would inherit his throne, but many of them turned away from him. God couldn't

ignore this lack of believing loyalty. He also couldn't just scrap his promise. That would be like admitting the whole thing was a bad idea—and a God who knows everything can't have a bad idea.

So how could God honor his promises to a people who had rejected him and who were estranged from him? They needed new hearts. They needed his presence to guide them. What was needed was a descendant of Abraham, and of David who could be the ultimate king and perfect imager of God. That descendant also needed to overturn the curse of death on the human race. But how could a mere human conquer death? He'd have to be God as well. How was all that supposed to work?

No problem. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

GOD JOINED HIS HUMAN FAMILY

Christians know all about the coming of Jesus. They know he was miraculously birthed by Mary, a young girl who was a virgin (Matt 1:18-25). The wider culture is familiar with the image of baby Jesus in the manger, especially in Christmas decorations. Several old, but still popular, Christmas songs celebrate how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecies about a messiah.

THERE'S MORE TO JESUS THAN THE CROSS

The entire focus is typically on Jesus being born into the world to eventually die on the cross. He would be the means of forgiveness for our sins and thus, our entrance back into God's family (John 3:16). In other words, when most Christians think about Jesus, they have the cross in mind. That misses something.

The fact that God became a man in Jesus gets a little lost in the focus on the cross. Most Christians don't realize that it was *necessary* for God to become a man for many reasons: to fulfill all the Old

Testament covenants and to overturn the results of the supernatural rebellions we talked about earlier.

The hope that human beings could still one day be with God forever was kept alive by God's refusal to eliminate humanity or scrap the plan. He kept returning to humanity, offering them forgiveness and a relationship with him. God wanted them to believe and show they believed by living in harmony with him and each other. But God's children rejected him at every turn. It's as though every time God said "You can still be with me—believe that and then show me where your heart's at," the problem got worse. The Bible uses the analogy of wandering sheep with no shepherd to describe this propensity (Isa 53:6; Matt 9:36). That's pretty much on target.

As I noted at the end of the last chapter, God's children needed new hearts and God's presence to help them believe. They needed a means to be saved from themselves and from a destiny that didn't include everlasting life with the God who loved them. There had to be a way for God to honor his covenant promises, to reverse the curse of death, and to help his people continue in their faith.

God's solution to these problems was radical. He had to *become a man*. He had to join the human race. *This is where Jesus enters the story*. Jesus was God become man (John 1:1, 14-15; Col 1:15-20; 2:6-9). He was the solution to every one of these obstacles.

Only by dying on behalf of all humanity could the curse of death upon humanity be reversed. That meant such a death had to be followed by a resurrection, something only God could accomplish. *Jesus was the solution for what happened in Eden.*

Remember God's covenant with Abraham? God had supernaturally intervened to enable Abraham and Sarah to have a son. That was the beginning of the nation of Israel. God told Abraham that one of his descendants would bless the nations God had forsaken at Babel. But how could a mere man do that? Only God himself could be the loyal descendant of Abraham who would fulfill the promise of that covenant to bless the nations outside Israel. *Jesus was that descendant of Abraham* (Matt 1:1; Luke 3:34). He was

the promised offspring who would release people in the divorced nations ("Gentiles") from other gods so they could rejoin God's family (Gal 3:16-18; 26-29). *Jesus was the solution for fulfilling the covenant with Abraham.*

Jesus was also a descendant of David, so he was the rightful king (Matt 1:1; Luke 1:32; Rom 1:3). *Jesus was the solution for fulfilling the covenant with David.* He had the right ancestry *and* was perfectly loyal to God. He never disobeyed God. He never committed any sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22). The fact that he never sinned also meant he was the perfect example of the purpose of God's law and the covenant made at Sinai. Jesus was the ultimate imager of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). He is the illustration of how to image God; God wants us to conform to Jesus's example (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). As we'll see later, that's also what being a disciple means (1 Pet 2:21).

God becoming a man is a difficult idea to grasp. God could become a man because he is more than one person. God is three persons who are completely the same in their nature. The Bible uses the terms "Father", "Son", and "Holy Spirit" to distinguish these three persons. Christians call the result of that labeling the Trinity. "God the Son" became a man as Jesus (John 1:1, 14-15). Theologians call that the *incarnation*, a term that means God coming "in the flesh." Jesus would be the only human God the Father could rely on to fulfill the covenants.

You might recall that I mentioned earlier that God knew "from before the foundation of the world" that he would send the Son, Jesus, to bring people back into his family (Eph 1:1-14; 1 Pet 1:20). The amazing thing is that the Son was willing to become a man, be tortured, and die so that God could have a human family. Here's how one section of the New Testament describes the conversation:

> When Christ came into the world, he said [to God the Father], 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me. . . .

> Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book' (Heb 10:5, 7).

It's a good thing that God the Son was willing to be born as Jesus. Not only were the covenants at risk, but overcoming all the misery caused by supernatural rebellions was at stake as well. We need to understand that those rebellions required God becoming a man—because God joining his human family set the stage for the coming of the Spirit.

FIXING MORE THAN THE FALL

Because God became a man in Jesus, he could die. That was important because death could only be defeated by resurrection. You can't have resurrection without a prior death. Since Jesus was also God he had the power to bring himself back to life (John 10:17-18). Since the death of Jesus was God's plan, God knew from before the foundation of the world that he would raise Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:23-24, 32; 3:15; 10:40; Gal 1:1).

Because of the resurrection, our distance from God was bridged. Death was overcome. Those were the effects of the rebellion in Eden. The Adam and Eve problems, caused by the temptation of the serpent (Satan), were solved. Everyone who believes that Jesus' death and resurrection provided forgiveness of sin and everlasting life will be in God's family forever (Rom 4:16-25; 8:10-11; 10:9-10; 1 Cor 6:14).

Once Jesus rose from the dead he had to return ("ascend") to heaven. Jesus ascended to heaven and took his throne next to God the Father (Mark 16:19; John 20:17; Col 3:1; Heb 12:2). This was a precursor to sending the Holy Spirit, who would indwell believers (Acts 2:33; Rom 8:9-11). Jesus had to leave so the Spirit could come (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:7; Luke 24:49).

The coming of the Spirit was the fulfillment of the new covenant described by Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:22-28). It would be the Spirit who would provide victory over depravity

(Gal 5:16-17), and whose works would be "greater" than Jesus's own (John 14:12). Jesus knew his death and resurrection were key to the new covenant coming to pass. This is why at the Last Supper Jesus told the disciples that his blood was "the blood of the covenant" poured out for them (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). Once Jesus ascended back to heaven and the Spirit descended to earth, humanity was not helpless against depravity.

The bottom line is that for God to clean up the problems with having a human family—the perpetual failures and rebellions—he had to become a man and fulfill all the terms of the covenants himself.

Think about my original question in this book: What does God want? He wants *you*. And he sent his unique Son to earth as Jesus to fix the problem of death and sin, to fulfill his covenants with humanity, so he could bring *you* home forever. God joined the human family. There was no other way. There are a lot of reasons why the gospel has nothing to do with our behavior—earning God's love and salvation. This is the biggest of them. It's insane to think our imperfect behavior could ever be adequate. The coming, death, and resurrection of Christ would never have been necessary if we could earn salvation.

Satan and His Minions: Dumb and Dumber?

There's one more twist in this story that I don't want you to miss. You may have wondered something. I know I did (more than once). If the death and resurrection of Jesus overturned the effects of what the serpent (Satan) had done, and impeded the wickedness that permeated the world, and amounted to taking away the authority of the defiant gods of the nations, *why in the world would Satan and the other evil spirits ever kill Jesus*? It seems blazingly stupid.

Think about it. The key to everything in God's plan was Jesus' death, because you have to have a death in order to have a resurrection that overcomes death. And Jesus could not have gone back

to be with God the Father if his mission was not accomplished—which means the Spirit could not have come to deal with depravity. If Satan and all the other powers of darkness had just let Jesus alone, *God's plan would have failed.* Are they supernatural idiots?

I've written a lot about this topic. It's fascinating. The New Testament actually answers this question. In talking about the good news ("gospel") of Jesus that he preached, the apostle Paul said:

> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7-8)

"Rulers" is a word Paul used elsewhere for evil members of the spirit world (Eph 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16). The point is simple: *Satan, demons, and the rival sons of God didn't know what God's plan was.* For sure they knew who Jesus was when he started his ministry. They called Jesus the "son of God" and "son of the Most High" (Matt 4:1-11; 8:29; Mark 1:12-13, 21-24; 3:11; Luke 4:1-13, 31-37; 8:28). The Old Testament made it pretty clear that God still wanted a human family to rule with him just like the original idea of Eden. Satan and his buddies could have guessed Jesus was here to get that ball rolling. But they had no idea how. The logical thing in their view was to kill him. But that was the key to everything. God played them like fools.

It's easy to chuckle about how much smarter God was than any of his supernatural enemies. But let's not miss the point. God joined humanity not to make Satan or demons look silly. He did it because he wanted *you* in his family. He needed no other motive. You were enough.

But there's still more to the story. Jesus did his part. We need to take a closer look at the Spirit's role for a simple but significant reason—it's directly tied to our roles in helping God recruit as many people as possible back into his family.

CHAPTER FIVE

GOD PURSUES HIS FAMILY

As I noted in the last chapter, the coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of the new covenant described by Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:22-28). The Spirit's ministry in each believer makes victory over depravity possible. Think of it as a slap in the face to the fallen sons of God. But it's an even more direct assault on another set of supernatural villains.

The Spirit's arrival launched an infiltration campaign against the sons of God to whom God assigned the nations he divorced (Deut 32:8)—the supernatural beings who defected from serving God and became corrupt, abusing the people under their dominion (Psalm 82).

Jesus knew all that. We habitually miss it in our reading of the New Testament books that come after the resurrection (i.e., the book of Acts to the end, the book of Revelation).

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Jesus's departure put the coming of the Spirit into motion (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7; Luke 24:49). While the resurrected Jesus was still on earth, he told his followers what was coming right around the corner:

> And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:4-5, 8)

If you keep reading the book of Acts it doesn't take long to figure out what Jesus was forecasting. Once he leaves (Acts 1:9-11) the Spirit arrives in (literally) a blaze of glory in the next chapter.

> When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

The rest of the account tells us that the Holy Spirit enabled the followers of Jesus to speak in all sorts of languages. They were telling the story of Jesus—his death and resurrection—to Jews from all over the world. "Jews" was the name given to the Israelites in foreign lands, who had been scattered all over the world in exile back in Old Testament times. The Jews who heard the followers of Jesus preaching to them in their own language were descendants of Old Testament Israelites. They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the holy feasts on the old Israelite religious calendar.

The people in Jerusalem who knew who the followers of Jesus were thought the whole public display was drunken madness. It just wasn't possible that all of a sudden these men could speak in

other languages. But then the apostle Peter laid it all out for them. Honestly, did more than that—he let them have it:

> "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below. . . . And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. . . . Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.'" (Acts 2:14-19, 21-24, 33)

Peter was telling them what they were seeing with their own eyes, and hearing with their own ears, was a miracle caused by the arrival of the Holy Spirit of God. He told them God had sent his Spirit to tell them what had happened. The messiah had come, been

killed, had risen from the dead—and they needed to believe. The result of Peter's explanation was stunning. Three thousand people "called upon the name of the Lord" for forgiveness and were saved (Acts 2:41).

This is usually the point in the story where the preacher moves on (or backward) to talk about the cross. That's all well and good, since the cross and the resurrection had led to this moment. But again, we're missing something *very* significant about the story.

SUPERNATURAL INFILTRATION

Remember, what happened in Acts 2 was about the coming of the Spirit. The arrival of the Spirit was the crucial element of a new covenant—a new set of promises God was giving to humanity. Many Christians don't realize that this also meant God was launching a spiritual war to reclaim not only Jews who had rejected Jesus but also Gentiles, people from the nations he had rejected back at the Tower of Babel. *God was in pursuit of his family*, and it didn't matter where his children lived. He wanted them and would find them.

The passage we just read in Acts 2 tells us the Spirit came with wind and fire (Acts 2:2-3). Fire and "burning smoke" were common elements in visions of God's presence in the Old Testament (Exod 13:21-22; Ezek 1:4, 13, 27). God at times came in a "whirlwind" (Isa 6:4, 6; Ezek 1:4; Job 38:1; 40:6). Jews who heard Peter's message and saw the coming of the Spirit with their own eyes knew the day of salvation had come.

Think about what happened in this scene. Three thousand Jews, living abroad in the nations where their ancestors had been scattered, had come to Jerusalem for a religious feast day. They witnessed the coming of the Spirit and heard about Jesus, the messiah, and what he had done. They believed in Jesus. They became Christians, his followers. What do you suppose they did next?

They went home.

Why does that matter? Because now the lost, divorced nations had three thousand evangelists planted in them. They were like secret agents, embedded in hostile territory held by other gods. They would be God's initial means to multiply the size of his human family. They were the first wave. Their mission? The same one Jesus had given to his disciples: the Great Commission. Christians know the verses well:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19-20)

But again, something is missed. That's the Great Commission all right. But I skipped verse 18, the one that's usually skipped when people talk about our mission to evangelize. Here's the full statement of Jesus with something important in bold:

> And Jesus came and said to them, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

Did you catch that? Jesus has all authority in heaven and *on earth*. The authority in heaven part is pretty easy to understand. Jesus ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God (Col 3:1; Heb 12:2). But what does the "on earth" part mean? This is easily missed. His ascent—which naturally had to follow his resurrection—marked the end of the authority of those who held power on the earth up to that point. Who was that? The fallen sons of God, appointed over the nations when God divorced them (Deut 32:8).

YOU'VE GOT NO BUSINESS BEING HERE

The implication is that the resurrection and Jesus' return to heaven meant that the authority of the rebel sons of God was now null and void. They no longer had legitimate dominion over the people in those nations. Salvation was not just for Israelites (Jews), even though the messiah was a descendant of Abraham and David. Jesus was the messiah for everyone, and rightful lord of every nation. The resurrection, ascension, and coming of the Spirit marked the beginning of the end for the fallen sons of God. They had lost their legitimacy.

This is why the New Testament associates the resurrection and ascension with the defeat of the supernatural powers of darkness. When God "raised Jesus from the dead" (Col 2:12) our sins were not only forgiven (Col 2:13-14), but "he disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col 2:15). Recall that "rulers and authorities" are terms Paul uses of the supernatural fallen sons of God who became the evil gods of the nations in Old Testament times (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:13).

The "rulers and authorities" is a favorite expression of the apostle Paul to describe the defeated powers of darkness. After he rose from the dead, Jesus went "into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (1 Peter 3:22). When God raised Jesus and seated him at his right hand, Jesus was placed "far above" the rulers, authorities and powers, "not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:20-21). In that age to come Jesus will "deliver the kingdom to God the Father" after destroying every ruler, authority, and power" (1 Cor 15:24).

Paul saw the resurrection and ascension as marking the beginning of the end for the fallen sons of God that had been allotted to the nations. It's no surprise, then, that he also linked that thought with the salvation of Gentiles, the people of the forsaken nations. The resurrected Jesus and the Spirit would release the Gentiles from dark powers who enslaved and abused them (Psa 82:2-5).

Recall that God had appeared to Abraham right after dividing the nations at Babel. He told Abraham that through him and his descendants, all those nations would one day be blessed. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, knew that promise well. He wrote that Jesus "had confirmed the promises" given to Abraham and his descendants "in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:8-9).

Paul wasn't done there. He was fond of quoting the Old Testament to show that God never gave up on the Gentile nations. He had wanted them in his family all along. Paul knew that the messiah, called the "root of Jesse" in the Old Testament (Jesse was king David's father) "would arise to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope" (Isa 11:10). Paul knew that the forsaken nations would one day worship the true God (Psa 117:1).

This program—a campaign of spiritual warfare—was launched when the Spirit came and 3,000 people believed in Jesus (Acts 2). Those new believers went back to their home countries. The gospel of Jesus infiltrated the nations under dominion of hostile supernatural powers. The Bible refers to this as the growth of the "kingdom" of God. As people turned from the corrupt, evil gods that could not offer them everlasting life and become members in God's family, God's kingdom grows. One kingdom diminishes; the other expands.

The kingdom of God is therefore already here in some sense . . . but not completely here in another. Not a moment goes by that God stops pursuing the children he loves and wants. His unseen hand is everywhere, in every circumstance, influencing and empowering his children to grow his family. One day God's plan will reach its peak. Everything will come full circle. The end of the story will be the one its Author had in mind all along.

CHAPTER SIX

GOD IS WITH HIS FAMILY FOREVER

I ended the last chapter with a firm grasp on some obvious points. Christ is risen. All those who have put their trust in what he did on the cross and his resurrection as the only means of salvation will have everlasting life. But while we are *already* members of Christ's kingdom (Col 1:13), that kingdom has *not yet* come in its fullness and finality.

The same is true of the defeat and destruction of Satan and various fallen sons of God. It is *already* in progress, but *not yet* realized. Satan has no claim—no ownership, no power of death—over any member of the kingdom of God. We belong to God through Jesus, and Jesus conquered death so that we might be resurrected to everlasting life with him and God the Father (Rom 6:8-9; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:42-49). Nevertheless, "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:2) is alive and well today.

Likewise the powers of darkness have been dethroned. But they have not surrendered. They resist, fighting a losing battle. Every person who embraces the salvation offered by God through Jesus is "delivered . . . from the domain of darkness and transferred . . .

to the kingdom of God's beloved Son" (Col 1:13). As the kingdom of God grows, the kingdom of darkness diminishes.

It's easy to get lost in the still-present evil and suffering of the world instead of looking to the future. Sometimes it's hard to remember that Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal 1:4).

The Bible doesn't condemn this dilemma. It's honest about it. "The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth" waiting "with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . [T]hat the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-21).

The Story's Exclamation Point

In what remains of the story, I want to focus on the amazing ending. Every great epic has a memorable ending, you know. The biblical story is no exception. (If you're expecting harps and clouds get used to disappointment).

We tend to process the final act of the Bible's story in terms of what we *get*. For example, we'll have everlasting life, not death. That's exciting, but "everlasting life" doesn't really say much. It's just a description about duration, not quality.

Quality of everlasting life emerges more in our minds when we process the end of the story as life in a new, global Eden. The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, completes the story with Edenic imagery (Rev 21-22). God is there. Heaven has returned to earth. Jesus is there. The tree of life is there. This Eden is actually better than the original Eden. Evil has run its course. There is no rebellion waiting to explode into the world. Creation is therefore perfectly optimized. There is no disease or death anywhere in the plant, animal, or human experience. There is no predation or violence. It's like nothing we've ever experienced.

The "Eden angle" gets us closer to what the Bible itself emphasizes at the climax of its story. The passage from Romans 8 I included above adjusts our thinking just a bit to bring the real pinnacle of God's plan: "the revealing of the sons of God. . . . the glory of the children of God." Yes, the creation groans to be made new, but that deliverance is linked to the glorification of God's human family.

In other words, *we* are the end game to what God has been doing. *Our status* as his children permanently fit for his presence and present with him permanently, is the forefront of the Bible's story. *Where* we live is just scenery (no doubt spectacular). The book of Revelation's final vision of the new Eden makes this point for me when it begins the final scene this way:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "**Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.**"

EVERLASTING IDENTITY

The "the revealing of the sons of God. . . . the glory of the children of God" is a way of saying that we will someday be transformed and made like Jesus. As the apostle John said, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The same thought is expressed in other ways:

> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom 8:29)

> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil 3:20-21)

Our destiny is to become completed imagers of God in the manner of the ultimate image of God—Jesus. That's already in process: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). The Bible finishes our story with resurrection and transformation. We are raised to everlasting life and given a glorified body, akin to the one Jesus had after his resurrection. Paul refers to it as a "celestial body" (1 Cor 15:35-58).

My favorite passage about our final destiny and glorification is a little more obscure. It's a scene in the book of Hebrews where Jesus introduces us to God and God to us. Jesus stands before God and "the congregation," the heavenly sons of God. He confesses boldly that he feels no shame in having us as siblings in the family (Heb 2:11) and then says to God and the supernatural members of the family: "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise. . . . Behold, I and the children God has given me" (Heb 2:12).

This is your ultimate destiny—becoming a permanent, legitimate member of God's family. In the end, you *belong* in God's family. It's what he's wanted from the very beginning. *That* is what the whole creation is yearning for.

EVERLASTING PARTNERSHIP

Have you ever had a conversation about what life in the new creation (heaven) will be like? I've heard lots of people describe it as an endless worship service, or endless Q & A session with Jesus, or a glorified church meet-and-greet. (That last one frightens introverts like me).

While we could infer some things by imagining what life in a perfected Eden might entail, the Bible doesn't say a whole lot about the experience. What it does say defies the sorts of guesses listed above. "Those who overcome," enduring in their faith in Jesus, will receive "authority over the nations" (Rev 2:26). Jesus will have them "to sit with me on my throne" (Rev 3:21). We will one day "judge angels" (1 Cor 6:3).

What do these phrases mean? We can start by asking who rules the nations *now*? The answer is the fallen sons of God allotted to the nations at Babel. In other words, the nations at this moment have not yet been fully (or even mostly) reclaimed by God. The expansion of the kingdom of God is a gradual process as we've noted—a process "already" begun but not yet complete. When the process is complete at the end of days, believers will "judge angels"—we will pass judgment on the fallen sons of God by replacing them. We will rule the nations with Jesus our king—and brother.

Whenever I speak about this idea I get certain inevitable questions: What tasks will we have? Will some believers have more authority than other believers? Will I be another believer's boss? How can we all be rulers? Do our works dictate who is over whom?

These are all understandable questions *from people who live in an imperfect, fallen world.* Our perspective is tainted by the flawed, damaged world we experience. But the Bible doesn't portray our final destiny as a boss-employee relationship. It's a father-child relationship. We, God's children, work *with* him alongside our siblings, whether human or divine. We image God together now the way we were intended to do. And the brother we all look up to most is

Jesus. All of God's children have been made like him, the ultimate imager of our Father.

The point is that our rule in the new Eden isn't about hierarchy; it's about *family partnership.* When all the family members are glorified, the need for supervisory hierarchy disappears.

To be honest, we just can't conceive anything like this. We live in a corrupted world. God wants us—he wants *you*—to experience life with him the way he intended it to be. And someday we will. As the Bible says:

> "No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
> and no mind has imagined
> what God has prepared
> for those who love him." (1 Cor 2:9, NLT)

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

Now you know what the Bible is really about. It's an amazing story.

You're probably wondering where we go from here. There are some important concepts to think about in light of the story.

Early in the story, I wrote this about Abraham:

> The apostle Paul used Abraham as an example of believing loyalty (Rom 4:1-12). Abraham believed and was accepted by God *before* he obeyed any rules. The rules were about showing he believed. They did not replace belief. Belief (faith) was the one essential thing. Loyalty to that belief—to that God—is something we'll talk about later. Today we call it discipleship. Belief and loyalty are two distinct things. They are related but not interchangeable. The same is true of salvation and discipleship.

That paragraph is our road map the rest of the way. The phrase "believing loyalty" will be our guide. Let me illustrate:

"Believing"

In the next section, we're going to talk about the gospel. We'll talk about what it is and isn't. We'll learn what it means—what the content of the gospel is according to the Bible. That's important because **believing** the gospel is how we become members of God's family. It's how we are saved. Salvation is by faith. It is the way God has provided salvation, the path he has created for joining his family. That all centers in what Jesus did.

"Loyalty"

In the last section of the book, we're going to learn about discipleship. "Disciple" is a term that means "follower." Being a disciple of Jesus means following him—imitating him. Jesus said "he that has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:7, 9). Jesus lived in a way that showed he loved God—that he was **loyal** to his Father and his plan. Discipleship is how we show we love Jesus and love God. It's *not* about earning God's love. It's how we thank Jesus for accomplishing God's plan to save us. It's not about replacing or supplementing what Jesus did for our salvation. It's how we show we believe in what he did for our salvation (James 2:14-26).

As I said earlier, belief and loyalty are two related, but distinct things. They are not interchangeable. The same is true of salvation and discipleship. We believe the gospel for our salvation. We show loyalty to our Savior by being his disciple.

PART II

THE GOSPEL

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHAT'S THE GOSPEL?

It may sound odd to ask that question at this juncture. We've just spent a good bit of time walking through the story of the Bible, the story of how God wants us in his family. We join that family by believing the gospel.

I've discovered that a lot of people who attend church don't really understand the gospel. Some can't articulate it. Others who *can* express it coherently often struggle with truly surrendering to its simplicity. They suffer inside over truly believing that the gospel is all that's necessary for everlasting life.

Some of you may wonder what I'm talking about. I'm willing to bet, though, that as I explain what I mean, you'll either see yourself or someone you know in what follows.

We'll start by defining the gospel. I'll ask some questions along the way that are important to consider for clarity. We also need to talk about what the gospel *isn't*. When we get to that part of the conversation, you'll see what I mean by the struggle I mentioned.

WHAT'S THE GOSPEL?

It's fairly easy to define what the *term* "gospel" means. The biblical word "gospel" refers to the message of salvation. The English word "gospel" is a translation of a Greek word (the original language of the New Testament) that referred to a reward given to someone who brought good news. Hence you'll often hear the term "gospel" equated with "good news"—the good news about the message of salvation.

Let's think about that. It might feel like we learned something. I suppose we did, but we didn't actually learn the thing we needed to know. It's nice that we can now *define* a term. But we actually haven't said anything about the *content* of the message of salvation. We've defined what the word "gospel" refers to, but not what the gospel actually *is*.

So let's talk about what the gospel *means*. What is the *content* of God's offer of salvation? What are the *details* of the good news? And *why* is it good news? The word appears almost 100 times in the New Testament so we ought to be able to figure this out.

The apostle Paul probably talks about the gospel message more than any other New Testament writer. He uses the word "gospel" for the message he preached about Jesus:

> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you. . . . That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:1-4)

Paul defines his message, the gospel, elsewhere:

> Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God . . . concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the

> flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith. . . . (Rom 1:1-5)

The content of the gospel—the good news—emerges clearly in these passages. Here are the elements:

- God sent his Son . . .
- Who was born in the line of David . . .
- As the man Jesus Christ . . .
- Who died for our sins . . .
- Who was buried . . .
- And who rose from the dead . . .

These items are the *content* of the good news. Let me describe them again here in light of the bigger picture of the story we talked about earlier:

> The Son of God became a man. He suffered and died on the cross so that our sins would no longer keep us out of God's family. He rose from the dead so that we could also overcome death and be with his Father, our Father, the only true God, forever.

Let's probe that a bit. If this is the good news, *why* is it good? Lots of reasons. It's good because our salvation doesn't depend on our own performance. You don't see anything about your amazing track record or having a clean rap sheet in those passages. The content of the gospel is not about what you've done, or might do, or need to do. It's about what someone else did for you. That's good news for all of us, because none of us is perfect. None of us pleases

God all the time. None of us is fit to live in his family and be called by his name on our own. *We have to be made acceptable to God.* The content of the gospel tells us how that happens.

Notice that Paul described his ministry of telling people the good news as "bringing about the obedience of faith." He wanted those who heard his message to "hold fast" to what he said. How do you "obey" the gospel? Get baptized? Give money? Behave well? Don't be a jerk? Help the poor? Those are all worthwhile things, but *No*. God wants "the obedience of *faith.*" You obey the gospel by *believing it.*

Did you also notice that Paul didn't say "the obedience of comprehension"? We may not completely understand things like God becoming a man in Jesus, or how the resurrection could happen. That's okay. God doesn't demand we figure it all out and then get back to him to take a final exam. He wants *belief.* Understanding why these things are rational can wait.

The content of the gospel is God's offer to forgive you and give you a permanent place in his family. His offer shows his love and kindness. The Bible sometimes uses the word "grace" in the place of those terms. Since there is no greater power, God wasn't coerced into the offer. No one is twisting his arm. He offers you salvation because he wants you. All he asks is that you believe.

That is the good news of the gospel.

WHY DO WE NEED THE GOSPEL?

You might think I answered this already. I sort of did, at least in a roundabout way. But in light of my experience in Christian circles, I need to be blunt.

Why do we need the gospel? Because without it we have no hope of everlasting life with God. Zero. We are estranged from God because of sin. Believing the gospel is the remedy.

The Bible describes our predicament in several ways. Jesus said he was here to "seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). By nature we

are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1, 5) and "ungodly" (Rom 5:6). We were "alienated from God" (Eph 4:18) and "hostile" toward him (Col 1:21), because we were his "enemies" (Rom 5:10). It's not a pretty picture.

The biblical story we walked through explains why we are what we are. We aren't born into the family of God. We're outsiders. Yet God wants us in the family. Lacking God's nature, we abuse our intelligence and freedom to get what we want, often harming others in the process. We live in self-destructive ways. When we don't image God and we break his laws, when we violate, manipulate, and otherwise abuse others, we sin. We are by nature sinners—self-absorbed and rebellious. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

It's easy to read that and be depressed or angry. But the good news of the gospel story is that God knew all that and loved us anyway. It's also useful for a reason that may never have occurred to you. It's what makes the gospel entirely different than any other religion's teaching about salvation. Every other religion either denies sin is a problem or says the solution is human performance—repeating rituals, saying prayers, observing religious days, or otherwise being good.

To be blunt, only the gospel is honest about the human situation and human inability to do a thing about it. Other religions in effect lie to you—they tell you that you can fix the problem of your own distance from God, or that you don't have a problem. The gospel is the only truth that tells you God had to provide the solution and did. The gospel is transparently honest. It tells you the truth even though it hurts. That shows love. Lying to you isn't love.

ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO BE SAVED?

I more or less just answered this, but I want to approach the question from a different angle.

God offers forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life with him *for free*. It's not something earned or deserved. In fact it cannot be

earned or deserved. What's required is belief, or faith—putting one's trust in God's promise and the completeness of what Jesus did.

But believing the gospel means *not believing* other teachings or ideas about salvation. The Bible says that there is no other way of salvation. Think about it. Why would God the Father send his son Jesus to die such a horrible death on the cross if there were any other way for you to enter Heaven? The Son had to become a man and death had to be overcome. This was the only way, and believing in God's plan is the only way of salvation. There is no person besides Jesus who can save (Acts 4:12). Jesus himself put it very bluntly: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

There's no ambiguity there. No one becomes a member of God's forever-family except through what Jesus has done. You don't add the gospel to other beliefs. It is exclusive. Believing the gospel means *turning away* from other beliefs. That's one aspect of what the Bible calls repentance. There are others, but they're best addressed in the next part of our conversation.

WHAT THE GOSPEL ISN'T

Our discussion about the *content* of the gospel makes it clear that the gospel is about what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. Everlasting life, salvation, is a gift given to those who believe in what Jesus accomplished on our behalf.

Our culture tries to muddle this clarity. It offers self-improvement or vague "spirituality" as substitutes. But the biblical description of the gospel defies such things. The gospel (and salvation) has nothing to do with personal enlightenment, "looking within" on a journey of self-discovery. The gospel is not about exploring ideas from a spiritual smorgasbord. These are intellectual or psychological efforts and activities. They aren't the gospel.

But these sorts of "alternative gospels" are the easy ones to detect and eliminate. There's a much more difficult hurdle that impedes

many people from resting in the simplicity of the salvation God offers.

I suggested earlier that a lot of people you'd meet in church struggle with the gospel. The reason is because they are caught in a performance trap. You or someone you know may be able to define the *term* gospel, and perhaps even the content of its meaning. But the idea that believing what Jesus did for you is the sum total of what's necessary for everlasting life just doesn't seem right. Surely we have to *do* something. Otherwise, how could we deserve it?

If you comprehend the Bible's story and the content of the gospel, you should grasp immediately that we *don't* deserve what God offers. And that's a struggle for many people. We want to feel like we've earned the good things we have. We don't want to be a charity case. It feels wrong to get something good without having worked for it, at least a little.

Guilt distorts thinking in even more subtle ways. It can paralyze our ability to see the gospel as the unconditional gift it is. Guilt is what drives some people to justify a gift by concluding it's deserved because of something they did for the gift-giver at some point. And if they can't convince themselves of that, they determine to do something after the fact to make themselves feel deserving of the gift.

Guilt blinds us to the love of God shown in the gospel. Ultimately, we must come to grips with how self-centered this thinking is.

That may sound harsh, but hear me out. Working hard to make someone else think you have value requires you to focus on yourself. You can't be focused on someone else when the goal is to make another person think you are worthy of their attention or love. We want to feel good about ourselves (i.e., we legitimately deserved something so we aren't taking what doesn't belong to us). We also want others to feel that way about us, too (i.e., we want others to give us something because of the way *we* make *them* feel about us).

The gospel strips this away and casts it aside. It exposes us, demanding naked humility. It insists the focus be entirely on God

and Jesus. That's why it's a hard pill to swallow for so many. It doesn't let us take any credit.

What it comes down to is that the gospel cares *nothing* about what you do, but cares *everything* about who you already are. You're human. You are the object of God's love and plan from the very beginning. None of that requires performance. It just *is*.

Because we're sinners living in a fallen world, we're locked into thinking no one would love us if they really knew us completely, inside and out. Consequently, we can't imagine God loving us since there's nothing about us that escapes his attention. He knows every thought, word, impulse, and deed. The guilt that creates within us, and the normalcy of our conditional relationships, make the unfiltered love of God for us in the gospel hard to accept. From our perspective, it doesn't make sense.

I should say at this point that I'm not suggesting that people who hear the true gospel and embrace it with all sincerity aren't really saved. I honestly believe that *they believe* and are in the family of God.

What I'm describing is the soul-crushing internal life many of those believers are still living. Their guilt has transformed the love and grace of the gospel into a performance-centered, merit-based experience. They begin to wonder if God still loves them like he did the moment they understood the gospel and believed it. They look at the sins they commit as believers as reasons for God to be unenthused and ambivalent toward them. They are convinced they can't measure up to God's expectations and wonder if they "believed enough" or perhaps didn't really believe at all when they thought they did.

The sad truth is that many *genuine* Christians live tormented, defeated lives, not because of the gospel, but because of the way their guilt has distorted the clarity of the gospel. When they read Scripture they see only their sins and failures. Every sermon is an indictment (and shame on preachers who preach with that as their

main intention). The spectacular wonder of the story gets lost and forgotten.

Salvation is *not* about performance. It never was, never will be, and *never can be.* We can do nothing to put ourselves at the level of God, to make ourselves fit for his presence. *We lack God's perfect nature.* We are like God, created to image him, but by definition we are *less* than God, and God knows it. That's why his solution was Jesus, *not you.*

It's absurd to think we can bridge that gap or fill that void by doing this or not doing that. God never learns anything new about you when you fail. He's known you all along and still loved you right where you were and are. Romans 5:8 says it best: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Did you catch that? *While we were still sinners.* You do not need to perform at a sufficient level to prod God into loving you. If you give that some thought, it's *really* good news. God is *never* disappointed with you, because He never has false expectations of your behavior. God has loved you all along. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

We can boil this down to two thoughts. Salvation—membership in God's family—cannot be earned. It can only be received, by faith (belief). God offers it because he is gracious and loving. There is no other reason, nor can there be.

PART III

FOLLOWING JESUS

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHAT'S DISCIPLESHIP?

The gospel is intended to be transformative. Anyone who has embraced the gospel "is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). What does that actually look like?

You may recall the answer to this question. Earlier I said that a disciple was a follower—specifically a follower of Jesus. I defined "following" as imitating or imaging Jesus. Being "conformed to the image of Jesus" is our ultimate destiny (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).

Our motive for imitating Jesus is not to *make* God love us so he'll let us into heaven. God already loved each of us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:8) and were God's "enemies" (Rom 5:10). We get to heaven—we become part of God's family—when we *believe* the gospel. On our own we are lost, in need of a Savior (Luke 19:10), alienated from God (Eph 4:18). When *that* was our situation, God loved us. He didn't wait until we cleaned up our act to love us.

Our motive for imitating Jesus is also not to *keep* God loving us so we'll be saved in the end. That which cannot be achieved by performance cannot be lost by performance. Salvation has nothing to do with our own worth or merit. It has everything to do with

what someone—Jesus—did for us. "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). We can take no credit for salvation. Jesus gets all the credit.

THINKING CLEARLY ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP

We need to think carefully about how all that applies to discipleship.

Because of the performance trap I talked about earlier, we need to have a clear grasp of the fact that salvation and discipleship are not the same thing. Many believers unconsciously begin to add their own works or performance to the gospel because of guilt for their sin. The result is spiritual bondage, not the abundant life Jesus wants us to have (John 10:10; 2 Cor 1:5; Eph 3:20).

Salvation is a gift given to us by God when we *believe* the gospel. It is undeserved. Nevertheless, God offers it to us despite our sin and hostility toward him. Discipleship is something we do as a *result* of believing the gospel. We imitate Jesus to show our love for him and for God. Jesus was the ultimate imager of God, so we want to live the same way.

There are a lot of reasons to live like Jesus—to live a holy life. Earning God's love isn't one of them. Salvation doesn't cost us anything; it's free for all who believe the gospel. Discipleship, however, does cost us something. Following Jesus is often not easy. Being a disciple requires making choices—to love and honor God, to treat people for what they are—fellow imagers of God that he loves and wants to bring into his family through the gospel.

Think about Jesus's own life. It wasn't easy. As the Bible says, "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Pet 2:21). Jesus lived a life of sacrifice. He put God first, followed by his "neighbor" (everyone else):

> "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This

> is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:36-40)

Jesus lived this way not so God would love him or be happy with him. God loved Jesus already, long before he ever came and "did works" (performed) to fulfill the covenant. He loved Jesus "before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24).

Following Jesus can be hard. Since no believer is like Jesus when they first believe—and since it's just hard to live like Jesus consistently—every disciple needs to have a change of heart (what the Bible calls "repentance") about his behavior. I know I did. There were things I had to stop doing, and things I had to start doing. But none of that was to make God love me. He already loved me.

Jesus did what he did because he loved God. So must we. Jesus lived a certain way to help others believe in him and God's plan. So must we. Jesus knew why he was on earth—how he would die a horrible death on our behalf. But he also trusted God's plan and power. He would rise from the dead and be with his Father once more.

We must have the same eternal perspective. This world isn't our real home. It's temporary. The next one is permanent. Because of what Jesus did we will inherit everlasting life in that world, leaving this one behind. The goal of our lives should be to show our loyalty and gratitude to the one who saved us, and help others enter God's family.

What if we fail? What if we sin? We will do both. God knows that. He knows humans pretty well! He knows who we are. But he already loved us before we had the slightest interest in doing anything to love him back. He loved us when we were his enemies—"while we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:8). God loved us before we were in his family. Why would he love us less, or stop loving us, now that we're in his family? When we sin and fail, He forgives us. He wants us to *believe* that and get back to imitating Jesus.

WHY LIVE LIKE JESUS?

I said a moment ago that there are a lot of reasons to live like Jesus, but *earning God's love isn't one of them.* What are those reasons?

First, sin is self-destructive and harms not only us, but those around us. In my own extended family I've seen the effects of alcoholism, drug addiction, and infidelity. It's obvious that these things destroy lives. It should be equally obvious that the things the world—the unbelieving culture—offers for pleasure and self-gratification are temporary and have no enduring value. The culture tells us to "live life" to gratify our own "happiness" regardless of the misery our decisions create. It offers no eternal perspective. It beckons us to live only for the now. There is no higher calling. The Bible exposes this mindset for what it is:

> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

Second, and in many respects the opposite of the first, living a godly life blesses others. The truth is that the way we live and think either blesses other people or curses them. Jesus served people and was a blessing to them. Pursuing a lifestyle driven by self-gratification and self-absorption isn't fulfilling. Every super market tabloid offers examples of that reality. Blessing people not only reflects Jesus, but leads to personal fulfillment. Your life matters when it's lived in service to others.

Third, a godly life allows us to be a consistent witness for the gospel. If people look at our lives and don't see any distinction from the unbelieving world, and don't see a life lived in service of others, they won't find the gospel believable (or at best they'll be confused).

They will see our lives as a contradiction of the message of Jesus. In other words, people will expect us to live like Jesus, the person we say loves them. That's not unreasonable. The alternative is hypocrisy, and no one appreciates hypocrisy.

Living a godly life isn't about earning a place in heaven. It's not about putting God in our debt because of the "spirituality points" we've racked up. Passages like these have an altogether different focus:

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

> But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. (2 Tim 2:19-21)

> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look

> not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:1-8)

These passages give us some idea of how we should live, but we still haven't gotten to the specifics of discipleship. How does a disciple live? What does a disciple do? Fortunately, Jesus and his original disciples, the first Christians, made that clear. Jesus never told his followers to do something he didn't do himself—and showed them how to do it. They in turn followed his example and taught others to do the same in the early days of the fledgling church.

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT DOES A DISCIPLE DO?

It might surprise you, but Jesus didn't command his disciples to do that many things. His vision for loving God and others wasn't complicated. But the things he did command them to do are profound and life-changing when put into practice. We'll start with the most important point of being a disciple.

DISCIPLES LOVE GOD, THEIR NEIGHBOR, AND EACH OTHER

We already know how Jesus summed up a life dedicated to God. The greatest commands were:

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 22:36-40)

Jesus did these things. He told his disciples, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31). How did Jesus show he loved God, his Father? He obeyed God. He fulfilled God's plan for him. He also told them, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9). Jesus asked his disciples to do the same, as his comments on the two greatest commandments make clear.

Jesus went further by using himself as an example. He told his disciples to love each other as he had loved them. When they did that, they'd be obeying him and pleasing God. He said to them:

> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (John 15:13-17)

> . . . [J]ust as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Love for God and love for each other are, according to Jesus, the fundamental, indispensable marks of his disciples. Jesus did not see these two commands as in any way contradictory. They were not in tension. They were two sides of the same coin. They were inseparable.

But how do we love people? The highest expression is giving one's life: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). This is what Jesus did for us:

> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—
> though perhaps for a good person one would dare even
> to die—but God shows his love for us in that while
> we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:7-8)

Short of this ultimate expression, I can't think of a better description than 1 Cor 13:4-7. It pretty much says all that needs to be said. Here are the characteristics of love from that passage:

- Love is patient
- Love is kind
- Love does not envy
- Love does not boast
- Love is not rude
- Love does not insist on its own way
- Love is not irritable
- Love is not resentful
- Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing
- Love rejoices in the truth
- Love bears all things
- Love believes all things
- Love hopes all things
- Love endures all things

You'll typically see points in this list on cards at Valentine's Day or romantic swag. That's fine—we ought to love our spouse or that person we hope might become our spouse. But 1 Cor 13:4-7 isn't really about romance. This is the way we should treat people in general. Whether they recognize it as love is irrelevant. God will see and know.

Some of those statements need to be read in context of other statements in the list. For example, "love believes all things" must be balanced with "love rejoices in truth." We cannot isolate "love believes all things" to conclude love believes false or evil teaching. In like manner, "love hopes all things" doesn't refer to hoping for evil against someone. But in general, the list is easy to understand—and a daily challenge to live out.

One more point before moving on. It's crucial to realize that basically everything that follows in what discipleship means extends from this first command of Jesus: "As I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Loving each other—loving people—is the central point of orientation for the other things disciples do (pray, fast, give, fellowship, etc.). All these other things are expressions of this fundamental command.

DISCIPLES TAKE CARE OF EACH OTHER

This element of discipleship is an outgrowth of loving one another. Taking care of each other means *being in* and *nurturing* community.

As more and more people came to embrace the gospel in the days following Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), they became part of a growing community that would be called the "church" (in their case, the one at Jerusalem). In the New Testament this term didn't refer to a building or an official organization. The New Testament tells us that the church in Jerusalem was notoriously poor. They didn't have a building to meet in (and there were thousands of new believers;

Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14). They didn't have any official legal status, so believers were persecuted (Acts 3:11-4:31; 5:17-42).

If "the church" wasn't about a building or an organization that had legal status, what did it mean? How did the followers of Jesus sustain themselves? They formed a tight, self-sacrificing community. Too often in modern churches we use the word community to describe something more similar to a group of people who share an interest—like being fans of a sports team or mutual supporters of a good cause. That falls far short of what New Testament community was. The New Testament church community was a family.

What's the difference between family and a group of people who bond together because of a mutual interest? Lots of things. Would you expect someone to give you money to pay your rent or groceries just because you liked the same baseball team? Would you expect someone to give you a job or fix your car just because you voted for the same person, or ran in the same 5K race to raise money for a cause? Of course not. But you *would* expect help from family members (or at least that's the way family—blood relations—is supposed to work).

That's what the early church was like. Here's a glimpse:

> So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all

> the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

This passage *doesn't* describe communism or socialism. It doesn't describe *any* political system. There's nothing in the passage about a government or the State giving direction or using coercion for the behavior you see. It was entirely voluntary. It describes the behavior of a healthy, normal family. Families meet the needs of their members. This one just happened to consist of thousands of people.

This is a picture of what disciples do. They nurture community. They love one another and support one another like a family would do. That means sharing resources. For some believers that may mean money; for others it may mean time, or a service, or a skill. Basically, community does what needs to be done for those in the community.

You might wonder, with so many people involved, how this community could know each other. Believers would gather together in the temple (which usually caused conflict with the Jewish leaders, but was good for evangelism) and met "from house to house" (Acts 2:46; 5:42). This means that "the church" in Jerusalem, the original Christian community, was actually a network of smaller communities. People in smaller numbers within the community were the first line of support and acknowledgment of new believers.

These communities were the entry points for new believers. The Christian community was for people who had embraced the gospel. Each community participated in the discipleship of its members and, in certain ways, believers in the wider, larger community. What did this look like?

The first thing that usually happened was to baptize new believers (Acts 2:41; 8:12-13; 10:47-48; 16:15). Baptism was a public act (it was observed by witnesses—other community members) to identify with Jesus and his followers. It signified several things, among them that your sins had been forgiven because of what Jesus had done on

the cross and that you now had new life (Rom 6:1-4; 2 Cor 5:17). Baptism was the first step to entering into the life of the community. The persons being baptized acknowledged their faith in Jesus, and the witnesses acknowledged their commitment.

When communities of believers met together, they discovered needs. If they could meet the needs of people in their small community, they would do so. This allowed believers who met needs to imitate Jesus. For those who were helped, they learned in "real time" how to live like Jesus. When needs were greater than the small community could meet, the wider family of believers was there to help. It was for this wider coordination of ministry that the apostles, the original disciples of Jesus who were leaders of the fledgling Jerusalem church, appointed helpers ("deacons") to organize the "daily distribution" (likely, of food) throughout the entire community (Acts 6:1-7).

One of the practices of the earliest churches in this regard was to hold a feast in connection with remembering the "Lord's Supper" (1 Cor 11:17-34). The "Lord's Supper" was a memorial celebration of the Last Supper, when Jesus told the disciples that his body and blood would soon be given for them. Jesus told them that giving his life was a fulfillment of the "new covenant" (Luke 22:20). The description of the feast at the Lord's Supper says the same thing (1 Cor 11:25). The Lord's Supper was a way to remember what Jesus had done. Jesus had told his disciples to do it "in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24-25). It was also another way to make sure the poor in the believing community were taken care of.

DISCIPLES FELLOWSHIP

"Fellowship" is a New Testament word that describes the activity of the believing community. Taking care of each other is part of biblical fellowship, because when believers meet together, needs can be discerned and met. That said, we need a short discussion of fellowship to talk about other things disciples do.

Many Christians today equate "fellowship" with having fun together. For sure doing fun things together strengthens relationships. Enjoying the company of people builds bonds. But that really isn't biblical fellowship in the sense of becoming disciples.

The basic difference between doing fun things together and biblical fellowship is that fellowship isn't just about spending time together. It's much more intentional.

The goal of fellowship is ultimately "becoming one mind" around Jesus so that we can "have his mind in us." In others words, the goal of fellowship is discipleship. A couple verses from Philippians capture the idea:

> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. (Phil 1:27)

> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. . . . Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:1-2, 5)

What does it mean to have the mind of Christ and then to be of one mind as a community of believers? Does it mean everyone believes the same things down to the last detail? No. The Bible speaks of unity, not uniformity. A better way to understand "being of one mind" is that every member of the community is pursuing the same goal: to be like Jesus. The goal is harmony, not unanimity, in pursuing Christ-likeness and living in community together as believers.

Early believing communities engaged in a number of activities to build toward this goal. They prayed, fasted, worshipped, and studied the Scriptures. Since all of those activities are things disciples do individually as well as together, I'll talk about each one separately as we continue.

DISCIPLES PRAY

In simplest terms, prayer is talking to God. But that needs some thought. Doesn't God already know what we're thinking? He does. So why pray? Prayer isn't for informing God. Prayer is a way we can show God (and others) that we depend on God. It is a way to express that we want God to act, that we aren't relying on ourselves, or that we cannot find a solution ourselves. Prayer fosters our own sense of dependence on, and security in, God alone. In that sense, prayer is worship. The same is true for prayer in groups.

In Luke 11:1 the disciples, referring to John the Baptist and his followers, asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Jesus' response is the now famous "Lord's Prayer" (Luke 11:2-4; cp. Matt 6:9-15). It is important to note that Jesus didn't tell the disciples what words to pray in the Lord's Prayer. Rather, he told them to pray "like this" (Matt 9:9). He was giving them a model. We don't need to use formulas or special words to talk to God. *Just talk to God.* Also, prayer should never be done for show (Luke 18:9-14).

There's nothing in the Lord's Prayer that God isn't already aware of. Again, prayer isn't about filling in gaps in God's knowledge. Rather, the Lord's Prayer is laced with things like worship and honor of God ("hallowed be your name"), obedience to God's will ("your will be done"), forgiveness ("forgive us our debts as we forgive others"), and requests to be delivered from temptation and evil ("lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil"). Prayer is something that is designed to align our hearts with God's lordship of our lives and build an attitude of dependence on him.

The Bible is filled with prayers, both individual and corporate. If you read them you learn that prayer is also a means by which we can pour out our feelings to God—anger, grief, love, etc. God isn't learning anything when we do that. We learn to submit to him, believing he is good and knows best, and asking God for help. Jesus said God would indeed answer in the wider context of his wise will. In other words, God's answers may not always be what we want, but God knows everything else that's going on in the course of all human experience and behavior, and is working his greater plan. God may also answer in an unexpected way.

The prayers of the Bible are also not self-focused. Most of their content is aimed at blessing others or asking God's mercy upon others. Paul's letters habitually include prayers for those to whom he's writing. Prayer is not always, or even mostly, about expressing our own needs and wants.

Jesus prayed frequently. He followed his own teaching that prayer should be persistent (Col 4:2-6, Luke 18:1-8). Jesus didn't get every prayer answered—which was acceptable to him, since he was more concerned that God's will would be done (Matt 26:36-46). This is an important reminder about prayer. Jesus taught that God would answer when we pray (Luke 11:9-13), but we cannot assume that God would answer the way we want if we are disobedient to him or not in concert with his own will (James 4:3; 1 John 3:22; 5:14).

DISCIPLES FAST

Fasting may be unfamiliar to many readers. Generally, to "fast" from something means to *abstain* from that thing. To "fast" from food means to go without eating. This is the kind of fasting we see most often in the Bible, though not always. Jesus fasted (Matt 4:2). He presumed the disciples would follow his example and warned them to not be hypocrites when they did so (Matt 6:16-18). Fasting isn't about drawing attention to yourself. It's between you and God.

Fasting isn't merely about abstaining from food. You can fast from all sorts of things in whatever manner you want. Jesus wasn't recommending a strategy for losing weight. He has something else in mind when he fasted and when talking about fasting. While the Bible contains many instances of fasting, there are no specific rules. Paul noted that married couples might fast from sex (1 Cor 7:1-5) to devote special attention to a matter of prayer.

But why do it? Paul's words in 1 Cor 7:5 about couples agreeing to abstain from sex for a time give us an indication: "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer." Fasting is a spiritual practice designed to help us focus on prayer. How does it do that? Perhaps an example helps. If you decide to fast from food for a day, whenever you're hungry you are reminded to pray. Your fasting is a reminder and directs your attention to the reason you decided to fast.

Another way to think about fasting is to ask what distracts us from prayer or, more generally, our walk with God. The answer might be our phones, television, or some hobby. These are all things we can set aside for a time ("fast" from) to bring our minds back to God and prayer.

Early church communities fasted so as to collectively focus on prayer (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23). In the Old Testament, community fasting was also a way to show collective sorrow for sin and repentance (Jer 36:6; Joel 2:12).

DISCIPLES WORSHIP

You might think worship is easy to define or understand. Well, it is and it isn't. We too often equate worship with what happens in a church service, mainly the music. That isn't worship, at least in terms of how the Bible defines it, though music and song were part of Christian gatherings (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). Another propensity in our culture is to think of worship as an inner-directed mystical

feeling or experience. That isn't worship either. There are a number of passages we could think about, but let's look at two:

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

> Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him." (John 4:23)

We've already talked about the first one in our discussion of living a holy life. How do you worship God? Live like Jesus. Don't be conformed to the world—its values and self-gratifying pursuits. *That* is worship. True worship is thus a matter of the heart.

The second passage is interesting for a specific reason. Jesus told the woman that God is seeking people to worship him. Worship is therefore not something that originates with us. We are *invited* to respond to God's goodness and love. *How* and *where* we do that can vary. We can do this individually, with or without music, within or outside of a church service. We can also do that corporately, in fellowship with other believers.

When believers meet together in fellowship they "stir one another to love and good works" (Heb 10:24-25). In other words, they prod each other to spiritual worship—imitating Jesus. They praise God for his goodness, love, and providential presence in their lives (Acts 2:46-47; James 5:13). Praise included singing songs and making music (Matt 26:30; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), but is unmistakably linked to holy living ". . . approve what is excellent, and

so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:10-11).

We cannot lose sight of the fact that our "spiritual worship" of God is intrinsically tied to the way we live (Rom 12:1-2). It's not about a thirty-minute experience at home or in a church. It's about *a life* oriented by, and directed to, God.

Disciples Confess Sin and Accept God's Forgiveness

One of the things a disciple has to come to grips with as soon as their journey of following Jesus begins is that they will fail. None of us is sinless like Jesus (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:21-22; 1 John 3:5), nor can we hope to be. The Bible is clear on this point. The disciples sinned (Mark 14:30, 68, 72). One of them, John, wrote later in life:

> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:7-10)

It's wonderful to know, though, that our membership in God's family is not due to our performance. Our good works cannot put God in our debt. He never owes us everlasting life on account of any merit we might think we have. Our performance (or lack thereof) did not move him away from us. God loved us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:8). Consequently, we must remember that since salvation could never be gained by moral perfection, it cannot be lost by moral imperfection.

In light of our imperfection, the true disciple of Jesus must stay focused on the kindness and love of God. Look again at the passage from John's letter. It tells us exactly what to do when we fail God, either by doing something that *isn't* consistent with imitating Jesus, or leaving something undone that *is* consistent with being like him: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

When we sin and fail, we must acknowledge it. That's what confession means. We must not hide, excuse, or rationalize our sin. God wants us to admit it. Why? We need to be humbled. We need to remember that salvation is about what someone else—Jesus—did for us, not what we earn. Confession acknowledges that we are children of God because of Jesus. We can be sure that our sin will not separate us from God; we will not be kicked out of the family (Rom 8:31-39). God knew before we embraced the gospel that we were flawed. It's not something that surprises him. It doesn't change how he feels about us.

An obvious question then is why we should care about sinning. The New Testament disciples came across that attitude in people. The apostle Paul brought it up in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

> What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? . . . Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as

> obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Rom 6:1-2, 12-16)

Notice that the Bible doesn't say "God forbid, don't sin or God won't love you anymore!" Rather, the concern is returning to the bondage of self-destruction. So, on one hand, we will sin, but on the other hand, we should avoid sinning. This struggle is something the apostle Paul knew well (Rom 7:7-25), yet he was a remarkable follower of Jesus. The New Testament alerts us many times that there is a war going on inside us. Our hearts want to follow Jesus, but our unperfected selves want self-gratification and pre-eminence in how we live (1 Pet 2:11; James 4:1).

As we seek to follow Jesus, it's a good idea to, so the saying goes, to "keep short accounts with God." The idea is that when we fail, we should be quick to confess it and thank God for his forgiveness. We should remember what our sin cost Jesus. We should keep following him in loyal love, being grateful that he went to the cross "while we were yet sinners" (Rom 5:8) so we could be his brothers and sisters.

DISCIPLES STUDY THE BIBLE

In the early church, believers would listen to the apostles' teaching and study Scripture. Paul and other missionary-apostles did the same thing when they started churches elsewhere (Acts 2:42; 4:2; 5:42; 17:10-11; 18:11; 20:20). This was the more common method of learning the Bible in the New Testament era because most people did not have their own copy of the Bible. Many believers could also not read. Even though we are part of a literate culture and have access to the Bible, we can benefit from learning in community.

Learning the Word of God is necessary for following Jesus. How else can we learn about sin (behaviors and attitudes to avoid) and Spirit-filled living (the way we should behave)? Scripture teaches us to "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner

of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24). When we become part of God's family through faith in the gospel, the Spirit indwells us (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:22) and helps us live fruitful lives:

> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:18-24)

Disciples learn and live out the Word of God in their lives. This is how Jesus showed he loved God—he obeyed God's will. Community is a significant help in doing that. In a community we come into contact with mature believers who have followed Jesus many years. We can learn how their lives changed as they learned to "put off the old and put on the new." We can go to them for encouragement when we struggle in our pursuit of being like Jesus. They can remind us of God's love and forgiveness. They understand, since every Christian struggles to turn from sin and do what's right (I John 1:5-10). Even the apostles struggled against sin and doing what was right (Rom 7:7-25; Gal 2:11-14). Community means accountability, empathy, and encouragement as we seek to be more conformed to the example of Jesus.

DISCIPLES SUFFER

This element might surprise you, but it's clear in the New Testament. Jesus told his disciples:

> If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. (John 15:18-20)

This is where believing loyalty is really tested. It's one thing to learn that we need to have a change of heart on how we live. It's quite another to be following Jesus and suffer for it. The apostles suffered for following Jesus (Acts 5:41; 9:16; 21:13; 2 Cor 11:22-29). Holding on to faith is a theme throughout the New Testament (Rom 8:17-18; 2 Cor 1:3-7; Phil 1:27-30; 1 Peter 3:13-17). Peter, one of the original twelve disciples, had seen Jesus suffer and been imprisoned for his faith (Acts 12:1-19). He wrote to believers who had been displaced and scattered by persecution:

> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:20-23)

Enduring suffering requires us to remember that the gospel does not promise ease in this life, but an everlasting place in God's family in the life to come. This world is not our real home.

DISCIPLES MAKE MORE DISCIPLES

While loving God, our neighbor, and each other is the most important aspect of *being* a disciple, the most important thing disciples *do* is make other disciples. This was the task Jesus commanded his followers just before he ascended to heaven. For that reason it's called the Great Commission:

> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

"Make disciples of all nations." That was a big part of the story of the Bible. The authority of the supernatural powers that have enslaved the nations has been taken away. God wants his children, his partners—disciples of his Son, Jesus—to share the good news of the gospel everywhere. God wants as many people in his family as possible. Our task is to tell the good news, live it out in front of them, and bring them into the family of God—and teach them to do the same.

How do we do that? We share our faith—how we came to believe the gospel. It's amazingly simple.

First, tell people about your life before you believed the gospel and embraced the forgiveness of God through Jesus. People enjoy stories, especially about other people. Why? There's always something in a person's story that connects to our own story. When you tell someone about your life before understanding the gospel some

detail of your life will be familiar to the person you're talking to—and maybe a lot that's in your story will connect with them.

Second, tell them why hearing and believing the gospel was a turning point for you. Usually this has something to do with forgiveness for our sins. It's wonderful to know that despite the things we've done to ourselves and other people, God still loves us and wants us so much that he offers us salvation. Then share the story of how God sent Jesus so that we could be forgiven and have everlasting life with him—the thing God has wanted from the beginning.

Third, tell people about the impact that believing the gospel and being forgiven has had in your life. Tell them what it's like to know God's forgiveness, love, and promise of everlasting life. Tell them how it's changed your perspective on who you are and why you're here. Tell them how embracing the gospel has changed you.

Some people may want to see proof of a changed heart. That's normal—and an opportunity to imitate Jesus. This is one of the important reasons to live a holy life. Jesus loved and served people. People want to be loved and look for authenticity in other people. Responding to people the way Jesus would is powerful. They will notice. They know when someone loves them or not. They know when you put them ahead of yourself for the sake of the message of the gospel. Not everyone believed Jesus. Not everyone will believe in the gospel when you share it with them and treat them like Jesus would. But *many* will.

IMPORTANT NAMES AND TERMS (GLOSSARY)

Terms included in this list do not include terms explained in the course of the book. Items capitalized and in boldface are included in the glossary.

Abraham – The man God chose to be the forefather of the people who would become known as Israelites or Jews.

Acts – A book in the New Testament about the history of the first Christians.

Adam and Eve – The first two humans (a man and a woman) God created.

Angels – Supernatural beings who serve God and assist believers in Jesus. The original Hebrew and Greek terms translated "angel" in English Bibles mean "messenger." The term "angel" is therefore a job description—it describes the role of a member of God's heavenly realm who takes messages to people from God. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Apostle – A Greek term meaning "sent one." There are different kinds of apostles in the New Testament.

Ascension – Jesus's return to heaven after his resurrection.

Assyrians – Historic enemies of Israel from Northern Mesopotamia

Babel - The ancient city of Babylon, located in southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq).

Babylonians – Historic enemies of Israel from Southern Mesopotamia.

Believer – Someone who embraces or has believing trust in the Gospel.

Bible – A collection of 66 ancient, sacred books, written by men guided providentially by God. The first 39 books are known as the Old Testament, followed by 27 books referred to as the New Testament.

Christ – A Greek word meaning "anointed one"; equivalent to "Messiah" and a title for Jesus.

Covenant – An agreement between two parties. In the Bible God makes covenants with humanity in which he extends promises and blessing to them. Covenants may or may not have conditions.

Cross – The means of the execution of Jesus. The Roman cross was an upright pole with a cross-beam on which victims were tied or nailed and left to suffocate after torture. In the New Testament, "the cross" also refers to the place where sin was paid for and Salvation secured for all who believe the Gospel.

David – Israel's second king, whom God promised an everlasting dynasty. The Messiah would come from this dynastic lineage.

Depravity – A term related to Evil and Sin, though it often refers to the extent and frequency of evil thoughts and behavior.

Devil – Another name for Satan and the Serpent. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Disciple – As a noun, someone who follows Jesus by imitating

his life and obeying his teachings; as a verb, "to disciple" someone is to teach them to follow Jesus.

Evangelism – The enterprise of spreading the message of the Gospel by various means.

Exodus – (1) The name of the second book in the Bible; (2) a term describing the ancient nation of Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt.

Evil – Whatever God deems morally or ethically bad, harmful, and offensive to him or his creation.

Faith – Believing trust (in someone or something).

Fall – The Sin of Adam and Eve in Eden and its ensuing implications.

Forgiveness (of sin) – When God pardons someone from their offenses and wrongdoing against him. When God forgives, any penalty owed to him is canceled. Related concepts include Grace, Mercy, and Salvation.

Garden of Eden – The place in God's original created world where Adam and Eve lived. God was also present in Eden.

Genesis – The first book of the Bible.

Gentile – A term describing anyone who is not part of ethnic Israel; i.e., "non-Israelite."

God – In the Bible, when this term is singular and capitalized, it refers to the unique, ultimate, and incomparable Supernatural being who created all that is and who loves humankind.

Godhead – The Trinity; the three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) of the one incomparable God.

Gospel – The message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Grace – When God offers or gives us what we do not deserve; God's kindness.

Great Commission – The mission given by Jesus to his followers to spread the Gospel and make disciples throughout the world.

Hebrew – (1) Another term for "Israelite"; (2) the language in

which the Old Testament was originally written.

Holy Spirit – The personal Spirit of God, equal to him in essence.

Isaac – The son of Abraham born of Sarah.

Israel – (1) The new name of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham; (2) the Old Testament nation begun by God through Abraham and Sarah.

Israelites – Members of Abraham's lineage; members of the nation of Israel.

Jacob – The son of Isaac and, therefore, Abraham's grandson. His name was later changed to "Israel".

Jesus – The Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, but who was also fully God. God became a man as Jesus to enact God's plan for the Salvation of humankind from Sin.

Jews – Another name for "Israelites," the people descended from Abraham. In ancient times, this was a term given by foreigners to the remaining two tribes of Israelites sent into exile.

Kingdom of God / Christ / Jesus – The rule of God through Christ on earth with believers. The New Testament presents this kingdom as present and in progress, but awaiting its ultimate fulfillment.

Mercy – When God withholds from us the judgment we deserve.

Messiah – A Hebrew term that means "anointed one." It refers to the ultimate king from David's lineage who would bring salvation from sin and liberation of God's people from their enemies. In the biblical story, Jesus was the messiah. The Greek equivalent of this Hebrew term is "Christ." Hence "Jesus Christ" is "Jesus, the messiah."

Moses – an Israelite born during the bondage of Israel in Egypt whom God chose to empower to lead Israel out of that enslavement.

Mount Sinai – The mountain where God called Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, and the place where God gave

Israel the Ten Commandments.

New Testament – The 27 books following the Old Testament. Their content concerns the life and ministry of Jesus, the history of the first Christians, and the spread of Christianity in the first century A.D.

Noah – The man whom God considered righteous at the time of the flood. God instructed Noah to build an ark (a large ship) to save himself, his family, and wildlife from the great flood.

Old Testament – The first 39 books of the Bible. Their content is chronologically prior to the birth of Jesus.

Paul – An Apostle of Jesus whose ministry focused on Gentiles (non-Israelites).

Peter – One of Jesus's original twelve Disciples.

Promised Land – A term applied to geographic Israel, the place God promised to Abraham as the location where his offspring could settle. Before it was occupied by Israelites, this land was referred to in the Old Testament as Canaan.

Powers of Darkness – All supernatural beings hostile to God's plan for his world and human family. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Resurrection – (1) Generally, the conquest of death by new life after death; (2) in the New Testament, a reference to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead bodily three days after he had been executed on the Cross, or the future rising of all believers to everlasting life on a new earth.

Salvation – The deliverance of someone who believes the Gospel from their estrangement from God due to sin. In salvation, one's sins are forgiven by believing the message of the Gospel. Salvation restores the believer to God's family.

Sarah – Abraham's wife whom God supernaturally enabled to conceive a child.

Satan – A name given to the serpent in Eden who deceived

Adam and Eve. Satan was the first supernatural being in God's creation that rebelled against God. Satan is God's arch-enemy in the New Testament. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Saul – Israel's first king.

Serpent – The enemy of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Bible later calls the serpent the Devil and Satan. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Sin – Any act or disposition that rebels against, or contradicts, God's standards of righteousness, morality, and ethics.

Solomon – One of the sons of David. Solomon inherited the throne after David's death.

Son – In the Bible, "the Son" (capitalized) refers to the second person of the Trinity, who became a man in Jesus.

Sons of God – In the Old Testament, supernatural beings either in the service of God or who rebelled against God. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Spirit of God – Another term for the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual warfare – The struggle against Sin and hostile Supernatural forces that oppose the operation of the Great Commission. See the "Summary of Supernatural Terms" following the glossary for more detail.

Supernatural – A term referring to that which transcends or falls outside the natural (physical, material) world and universe. A "supernatural being" refers to a being that is a spirit being who by nature is disembodied.

Ten Commandments – The initial ten moral laws given to the Israelites by God after the Exodus from Egypt.

Trinity – The three persons of the Godhead; the biblical doctrine that God is one but exists eternally in three persons.

SUMMARY OF SUPERNATURAL TERMS

The Bible presents us with a variety of terms for those beings who inhabit the spiritual world. Christian tradition has often merged these terms, creating confusion. I've devoted much of my academic career to these matters, and would invite anyone interested in the subjects of angels, Satan, and evil spirits to read (in this order):

- *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches About the Unseen World and Why it Matters*
- *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*
- *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host*
- *Demons: What the Bible Really Says About the Powers of Darkness*

The first of these books is like this one—it's not designed to be an academic discussion. The other three books are academic in nature (lots of footnotes and detail). There are thousands of notes

and references in these books drawn from scholarly resources to support the content.

For the present, it may be helpful to review or summarize the supernatural world referenced in our presentation of the story of the Bible.

The Bible teaches that there is an unseen world—a world of spirit beings. These beings do not by nature have bodies, though they can assume physical form. The spirit world is "supernatural"—a world that is of a different nature than the physical world and beyond ("super--") the natural, physical world.

God is a member of the spirit world, but is superior to it as its creator. God alone is uncreated and eternal. He created all the other spirit beings that inhabit the spiritual world just as he created all life in the world we know (i.e., the physical, material world).

The Bible describes the members of the spirit world with a variety of terms (e.g., Rom 8:38; 1 Pet 3:22). I've introduced some of them in this book. Some of these terms are job descriptions—ways of describing what a spirit being *does.* "Angel" is one example. The term means "messenger." All that said, in the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament, "angels" also became a term for any member of the heavenly host who had not rebelled against God. The term "demon" became the label for all who did rebel, despite the fact that "demon" had a variety of meanings in the ancient world.

The descriptive phrase "sons of God" is a family term that reminds us that God is the Father (Creator) of spirit beings. The term means more than that, though. I discuss the phrase in *Supernatural* and *The Unseen Realm* at length. "Sons of God" refers to a high rank in God's "labor force." It is drawn from the language of how a king's children in the ancient world received high positions of responsibility. In the biblical story, the "sons of God" were assigned to rule the nations God had judged at Babel—a job that was more important than merely delivering messages (the task of "angels").

Originally, all the members of the spiritual world were loyal to God. Things didn't stay that way. As we read in this book, God

shared his qualities with the members of the spirit world when he created them. One of those qualities was free will. Some of the members of the spiritual world exercised their freedom in rebellion against God's wishes and God's human family. Collectively, all spirit beings in rebellion against God and his people are the "powers of darkness." Nevertheless, the Bible distinguishes God's spiritual enemies during the course of the story of God's desire to have a human family.

The Bible describes three such rebellions. The first occurred in the Garden of Eden. One of the members of the spiritual world wanted to undermine God's desire to have a human family. In the biblical story that figure came to Eve as a serpent and deceived her. Later in the Bible labels like "Satan" (a term that means "Adversary") and "Devil" (a term that means "slanderer") became names for this original rebel.

Later in the biblical story some of the heavenly sons of God rebelled. They transgressed the boundary between the spiritual and physical world. The short book of Jude describes their sin as "not staying within their own position of authority." Church tradition eventually came to (imprecisely) call these rebellious sons of God "fallen angels" to describe their "fall" from holiness, or "demons" to denote their wickedness. This despite the fact that the Old Testament never uses "angels" or "demons" of the rebels of Gen 6:1-4.

Lastly, the "sons of God" to whom the nations were assigned after the Tower of Babel episode became corrupt at some point of their assignments. Psalm 82 is all about their judgment. These territorial entities are the basis for the supernatural "princes" associated with nations in Daniel 10, as well as the "principalities", "rulers", "authorities", "thrones", and "powers" Paul wrote about in various passages (e.g., Eph 6:11-12). All these terms speak of geographical dominion, and so they are appropriate to describe the situation that emerged after Babel in the biblical story.



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What does God want?

Sounds like a simple question, but if you give it a bit of thought, it's really not. For starters, you have to know who's asking the question. People will ask it for a lot of different reasons. It's pretty obvious that the question is a religious one. Questions about God naturally get filed in that folder.

If you've spent a lot of your life in church, you might think you already know the answer. You might know parts of it, but I can guarantee you'll see a lot that's new here. This isn't your run-of-the-mill "Christianity 101" book. Unfortunately, the thing that most often gets in the way of the wonder of the story is religion, and that isn't what this book offers. And if you've never been in a church or heard much about the Bible, don't worry. You've got nothing to unlearn or re-learn. It's all fresh. That makes you an ideal reader.

So what does God want? The answer is pretty simple. God wants you. That might surprise you. You may doubt it. That's okay. But it's the right answer. To be honest, though, it isn't enough of an answer. You can't get a sense of how amazing and profound the answer is by just that one sentence. There's actually a long, remarkable story behind the answer—one that isn't well known by most people interested in the question.

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