A CURIOUS PURSUIT

NO. 01

EXPLORE

Pursuing Life's Biggest Questions
Through Honest Conversations

DISCOVER

Conversations That Matter.
Truth Worth Pursuing.

HONEST. REAL. RELEVANT.

EXPLORE

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EXPLORE • INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

EVERY JOURNEY NEEDS A COMPASS

EVER BEEN HERE?

Imagine setting out on a trail you've never traveled before. At first, the path seems obvious. You can see what's directly in front of you, so you keep moving. But eventually the trail splits. Then it splits again. The farther you travel, the more difficult it becomes to know which direction to take. That's when having a compass matters. And sometimes, what you need even more than a compass is someone who knows the way to walk with you. Life can feel a lot like that.

Most of us spend our days moving pretty quickly. Work. Relationships. Family. Responsibilities. Bills. Goals. Experiences. Successes. Disappointments. We keep moving down the trail. But every once in a while, something causes us to stop. A beautiful moment. A painful loss. The birth of a child. A relationship ending. A diagnosis. An unexpected success that somehow didn't satisfy us the way we thought it would. A funeral. Or maybe just a quiet moment when the noise finally stops. And suddenly questions surface.

Is there more to life than this?

Is there actually a God?

Can I know what's true?

Why is there so much suffering?

Who really was Jesus?

Can I trust the Bible?

Why should I believe Christianity instead of something else?

What happens when I die?

These aren't strange questions. They're human questions. And eventually, almost all of us ask them. The problem isn't that we have questions. The problem is that we often don't know where to take them. Sometimes we need a compass. Sometimes we need a guide. And sometimes we simply need a friend willing to sit with us while we figure out which direction to go. That's why this book exists.

CURIOUS AND CONFLICTED

There's something we want you to know before you read another page: It's okay to be curious and conflicted. Actually, it's pretty normal. You can be curious about God and still have doubts about whether He exists. You can find Jesus fascinating while struggling with Christianity. You can want to believe the Bible while having serious questions about it. You can hope there's something beyond this life while wondering whether death really is the end. You can believe God is good and still be angry about something He allowed to happen. You can want faith and still struggle to trust.

You can even believe…

and doubt at the same time. One of the most honest statements in the Bible comes from a man who says to Jesus:

> "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Mark 9:24

Think about that. I believe. I don't believe. Both are somehow present in the same person. And Jesus doesn't reject him for it. Jesus meets him there. Maybe that's where you are. Part of you is curious. Part of you is skeptical. Part of you wants answers. Part of you isn't sure you'll like the answers if you find them. That's okay. You don't need to pretend to be somewhere you're not. This book isn't asking you to manufacture certainty. It's simply asking you to be willing to pursue your questions honestly.

JESUS WASN'T AFRAID OF QUESTIONS

When you read the stories of Jesus, you discover something interesting. People asked Him questions constantly. Some were sincere. Some were skeptical. Some were confused. Some were confrontational. Some people believed. Others doubted. Some followed immediately. Others walked away. And Jesus didn't seem threatened by any of it. One of His own disciples, Thomas, refused to believe Jesus had risen from the dead simply because everyone else told him it was true. Thomas essentially said:

> "I need to see the evidence for myself."

Jesus didn't shame him. He invited him closer. "Put your finger here; see my hands." John 20:27 Look. Examine. Come closer. See for yourself. There's something deeply reassuring about that. Jesus can handle your questions. He isn't threatened by your doubt. He isn't intimidated by your skepticism. And He isn't asking you to turn off your brain before you come near. In fact, throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly invited people to investigate. Come and see.

THERE'S A SEAT FOR YOU

There's another thing you notice about Jesus. He spent a surprising amount of time around tables. Meals mattered to Him. Jesus ate with religious people. He ate with irreligious people. He ate with people society respected and people society rejected. He sat with people who believed and people who weren't sure what they believed. Some came looking for answers. Others simply wanted to be near Him. And after His resurrection, we find Jesus sitting around another kind of gathering place. A fire.

John tells us that Jesus' disciples came ashore one morning and found a charcoal fire burning with breakfast waiting for them. One of those disciples was Peter. Peter had failed Jesus spectacularly. Yet Jesus still made room for him around the fire. There's something beautiful about those images. A table. A fire. A chair. A place where people can slow down long enough to talk about things that matter. That's the spirit behind this book. Imagine a chair waiting for you. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to arrive convinced. You don't have to know the Bible. You don't have to know the right answers.

You don't even have to call yourself a Christian. You just have to be willing to sit down. There is room for the curious. There is room for the conflicted. There is room for the person who believes and still wrestles. There is room for you.

SOME QUESTIONS NEED A TABLE

We live in an age with more information than any generation in history. If you have a question, you can search for an answer in seconds. But having access to more information hasn't necessarily made us wiser. Sometimes it has just made us louder. Everyone has an opinion. Everyone has a post. Everyone has a platform. Everyone has an argument. But life's biggest questions deserve something better than a comment section. They deserve a conversation. Some questions need time. They need listening. They need follow-up questions. They need room for someone to say:

"I'm not sure."

"I don't understand that."

"That makes sense to me."

"That doesn't make sense to me."

"Here's what happened to me."

"Here's why I struggle with that."

That's why Explore wasn't primarily designed to be read alone. It was created for friends. Around a table. Over coffee. Sharing a meal. Sitting around a fire. Driving somewhere together. Anywhere two people can slow down enough to have an honest conversation.

THIS ISN'T ABOUT WINNING AN ARGUMENT

If you're the person inviting a friend into these conversations, there's something important you need to understand. Your friend isn't a project. You don't need to win. You don't need to have every answer. You don't need to defend Christianity against every possible objection. And you certainly don't need to pressure someone into believing. Listen. Ask questions. Be honest. If you don't know something, say:

> "I don't know. Let's look into it."

That's not weakness. That's friendship. The goal isn't to get someone across a spiritual finish line. The goal is to create a space where two people can pursue truth together. Friendship creates trust. Curiosity opens the door. Questions deepen the conversation. And honest conversations can take us places arguments rarely do.

A COMPASS, NOT A CLUB

This book does have a perspective. We're not pretending to approach these questions without convictions. We're going to explore them from a biblical worldview. We believe God is real. We believe Jesus is who He claimed to be. We believe the Bible is trustworthy. We believe Jesus died and rose again. And we believe He offers something every human heart ultimately needs. But we're not asking you to accept those conclusions simply because they're written on these pages. Examine them. Question them. Talk about them. Wrestle with them. Bring your objections. Bring your experiences. Bring your doubts.

Bring your story. Think of this book less like someone handing you all the answers and more like someone putting a compass in your hand and saying:

> "Let's see where this points."

THE QUESTIONS WE'LL PURSUE

Together, we're going to explore some of life's biggest questions:

Is There More?

Is there more to life than what I can see and experience?

Is There a God?

Is belief in God actually reasonable?

Who Is Jesus?

Who was Jesus, and why does He matter?

Can I Trust the Bible?

Is the Bible reliable enough to build my beliefs and life upon?

Why Is the World So Broken?

If God is good, why is there suffering, evil, and brokenness?

Why Jesus?

Aren't all religions basically different paths to the same God?

What Did Jesus Do?

Why did Jesus die, and did He really rise from the dead?

What Now?

What does it actually mean to believe in and follow Jesus?

Can I Really Live Differently?

How do I find the peace, joy, and life Jesus promises?

What Happens When I Die?

Is death really the end?

These aren't small questions. And we won't pretend every one of them has a simple answer. But they're worth pursuing.

YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW WHERE THIS ENDS

Remember the trail?

A compass doesn't show you every turn in the journey. It simply helps you determine which direction to take next. That's all we're asking of you. Take the next step. You don't need to decide what you believe before you begin. You don't need to know where these conversations will lead. You don't need to resolve every doubt. You don't need to pretend you're less conflicted than you are. Just bring three things: Your curiosity. Your honesty. And your willingness to keep pursuing. Then find a friend. Grab some coffee. Share a meal. Build a fire. And pull up a chair.

Because maybe some of life's greatest discoveries begin exactly like this: Two friends. One conversation. A few curious questions.

And enough courage to wonder together…

What if there really is more?

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 01

Is There More?

Is there more to life than what I can see and experience?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Jake sat in his truck for a few minutes before going inside. It had actually been a good day. Work was going well. He'd recently gotten the promotion he'd been chasing, he had plans with friends that weekend, and financially he was doing better than he ever had. From the outside, there wasn't much to complain about.

But sitting there in the driveway, he couldn't shake a question that had been following him for months: Is this it? Work harder. Make more money. Buy nicer things. Take a few trips. Grow older. Eventually die. He wasn't depressed. He wasn't even unhappy. He just couldn't escape the feeling that life was supposed to mean more than this.

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Jake's question isn't unusual. You don't have to be in crisis to wonder if there's more to life. In fact, sometimes the question becomes loudest when life is going well. We spend much of our lives pursuing things we believe will satisfy us. Achievement. Relationships. Experiences. Money. Recognition. Comfort. Family. Adventure. None of those things are necessarily bad. Many of them are very good. But eventually we discover something strange. Good things can add meaning to our lives without being big enough to carry the meaning of our lives.

We reach one goal and almost immediately begin looking for the next. We finally get something we've wanted for years, only to discover that the satisfaction doesn't last as long as we imagined. It raises an important question:

Why do people who have so much still hunger for more?

Maybe that hunger isn't simply something to silence. Maybe it's something worth listening to. What if our desire for something more is actually a clue that we were made for something more?

TALK ABOUT IT

Don't rush to find the "right" answers. Start by talking honestly. Have you ever had a moment when you wondered, "Is this really all there is?"

What are the things you think make life meaningful?

What are you pursuing right now that you believe will make your life better?

If you accomplished everything you currently want, do you think it would be enough? Why or why not?

THINK ABOUT IT

Before we consider what the Bible says, think about something we all experience. Human beings seem to possess desires that go beyond simple survival. We don't just want food; we want to share a meal with someone we love. We don't just want shelter; we want somewhere that feels like home. We don't just want to exist; we want our existence to matter. We search for meaning, beauty, justice, love, purpose, belonging, and significance. We ask questions animals don't appear to wrestle with:

Why am I here?

What makes something right or wrong?

Does my life have a purpose?

Is there anything beyond what I can see?

What happens when I die?

These questions have followed humanity across cultures and generations.

CONSIDER THIS...

What if our deepest desires tell us something about the kind of creatures we are? Hunger corresponds to food. Thirst corresponds to water. Our need for relationship corresponds to other people. Of course, having a desire doesn't automatically prove that whatever we desire exists. But our deepest and most persistent longings are still worth examining.

Why are we creatures who hunger for meaning in the first place?

Why do we long for permanence while living in a world where everything eventually disappears?

Why do we long to be fully known and fully loved?

Why do we want our lives to matter beyond ourselves?

The Christian worldview offers a provocative answer: Maybe you were made for more because you were made by Someone more.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Thousands of years ago, a biblical writer wrestled with the same question. The book of Ecclesiastes describes someone searching almost everywhere for a satisfying life. He pursued pleasure. He accumulated wealth. He accomplished great things. He gained knowledge. He experienced success. Yet none of it could fully satisfy the deeper hunger within him. Then Ecclesiastes makes this fascinating statement:

> "He has also set eternity in the human heart."

Ecclesiastes 3:11

Think about that phrase: Eternity in the human heart. The Bible's explanation for our hunger for more is that human beings were created for more than what we can see, accumulate, accomplish, or experience in this life. We were created to know God. That means the longing we sometimes feel may not simply be dissatisfaction with our circumstances. It may be spiritual hunger.

The Bible begins with human beings living in relationship with God. Its story ends with humanity restored to relationship with Him. Everything between those two moments tells the story of God pursuing people who have tried to find life apart from Him. According to the Bible, the deepest human problem isn't that we don't have enough. It's that we were created for a relationship we've become disconnected from.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 and 3:9–14 together. As you read, pay attention to what the writer pursued and what he discovered. Then talk about it:

What did he believe might satisfy him?

Which of those same things do people pursue today?

Why do you think achievement and pleasure can satisfy us temporarily but struggle to satisfy us permanently?

What do you think the phrase "eternity in the human heart" means?

LOOK AT JESUS

Jesus spoke directly to this hunger. He once said:

> "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

John 10:10

Notice what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say, "I came to make people more religious." He talked about life. Jesus repeatedly encountered people who were looking for life in different places. Some looked for it in money. Others in success. Others in relationships. Others in religion. Others in reputation. Yet Jesus continually invited people beyond those things to Himself. One of His most interesting conversations happened beside a well. A woman came there looking for water. Jesus used her physical thirst to talk about a much deeper thirst. He told her:

> "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst."

John 4:13–14

Jesus wasn't really talking about water. He was talking about the human soul. We keep drinking from things that make us thirsty again. Another accomplishment. Another relationship. Another purchase. Another experience. Another promotion. Another distraction. Another weekend. Some of these things are wonderful gifts. But Jesus says none of them can ultimately give us what we're asking them to provide. They were never designed to. Jesus makes an extraordinary claim: The life you're looking for isn't ultimately found in something. It's found in Someone.

WRESTLE WITH IT

BUT CAN'T I HAVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE WITHOUT GOD?

Absolutely, people who don't believe in God can experience tremendous meaning. They love their families. They build friendships. They create beautiful things. They serve others. They fight injustice. They accomplish remarkable things. Christianity doesn't deny any of that. The deeper question isn't whether someone can experience things that feel meaningful without believing in God. The question is:

Is there an ultimate meaning to any of it?

If the universe is ultimately the accidental product of impersonal forces, and eventually humanity and everything we've created disappear, then meaning becomes something we create for ourselves. But Christianity makes a very different claim. Your life doesn't matter simply because you decide it matters. Your life matters because you were created intentionally by God. You are not an accident. Your existence isn't meaningless. And your deepest longing for significance isn't foolish. It may be pointing toward the One who gave you life in the first place.

ANOTHER WAY TO THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine finding a beautifully crafted watch lying in the middle of a field. You could study it. Measure it. Take it apart. Learn what every gear does. Determine what materials it's made from. You could explain virtually everything about how the watch works. But there is another kind of question science alone couldn't answer:

Why was the watch made?

For that, you'd need to know something about its maker. The same distinction matters when we think about our lives. Science can tell us extraordinary things about how life works. Biology can describe our bodies. Neuroscience can examine our brains. Physics can investigate the universe. But questions like Why am I here? What should I live for? Does my life ultimately matter? are questions of meaning and purpose. And purpose ultimately raises the possibility of a Purpose-Giver. Which leads naturally to our next conversation:

Is there actually a God?

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Before moving on, come back to where we started. Not with Jake. With you.

What are you hoping will make your life meaningful?

Maybe it's your career. Marriage. Children. Financial security. Adventure. Making a difference. Being respected. Finding the right relationship. Leaving a legacy. Now consider a harder question:

What happens if you get it?

Will it be enough?

Talk honestly about these questions:

Where do you currently look for meaning?

Which parts of the Christian explanation make sense to you?

Which parts are difficult for you to believe?

What are you still wrestling with?

What would "more" look like in your life?

There isn't any pressure to have everything figured out. That's the purpose of these conversations. We're exploring the questions together.

TRY THIS

For the next seven days, create five quiet minutes without your phone, music, television, or another distraction. Ask yourself:

What am I really living for?

Then try something else. Even if you're unsure whether God exists, pray one simple, honest prayer:

> "God, if You're there, and if there really is more, help me see it."

You don't have to manufacture an experience. Just stay open. Because perhaps the question "Is there more?" isn't the end of your search. Maybe it's the beginning.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 02

Is There A God?

Is belief in God actually reasonable?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Maya had never considered herself an atheist. If someone asked whether she believed in God, her usual answer was, “I think there’s probably something out there.” She had grown up around religion, prayed occasionally when life got difficult, and even attended church a few times with friends. But as she got older, belief in God began to feel less certain. Science seemed capable of explaining more and more about the universe, and she wondered whether faith was simply something people held onto because it made them feel better.

One night she was sitting outside with a friend looking at a sky filled with stars. The conversation turned toward life, the universe, and eventually God. Maya looked up and asked the question she had quietly carried for years: “How can anyone actually know there’s a God?” Then she added, “I’m not against believing. I just need a reason to.”

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Maya’s question gets to the heart of faith.

Is belief in God reasonable—or does faith require us to stop thinking?

Some people believe science has made God unnecessary. Others grew up believing in God but have never stopped to ask why. Some have been hurt by religion. Others have prayed and felt like no one was listening. And many simply aren’t sure. The question matters because almost everything else changes depending on the answer. If there is no God, then the universe has no ultimate Creator behind it. Meaning, morality, and purpose are realities human beings must ultimately construct for ourselves. But if God exists, then everything changes. The universe has a source. Human life has intention. Morality has a foundation.

Purpose isn’t merely something we invent. And perhaps the God behind everything can actually be known. So before asking which God or which religion, we should begin with the more fundamental question:

Is there good reason to believe that God exists at all?

TALK ABOUT IT

Before considering any arguments, talk honestly about what you already believe.

When you hear the word God, what comes to mind?

Would you describe yourself as believing, skeptical, uncertain, or somewhere in between?

What has most influenced what you believe about God?

What would make belief in God seem more reasonable to you?

If you became convinced God really exists, what do you think that might change about your life?

THINK ABOUT IT

No single argument can force someone to believe in God. And Christianity doesn't claim that God can be placed under a microscope and examined like a cell. The question is whether there are signs within reality that make more sense if God exists than if He doesn't. Think of these signs as clues. Individually, you might explain them differently. But taken together, they raise some fascinating questions. Here are three worth considering.

CLUE #1: SOMETHING EXISTS

Here's one of the simplest questions imaginable:

Why is there something rather than nothing?

Everything we experience in the physical universe appears to depend on something else. You came from your parents. A tree came from a seed. A building came from materials assembled by builders. Those materials came from somewhere else. Keep tracing things backward and eventually you arrive at the question of the universe itself.

Why does anything exist at all?

Saying that the universe exists doesn't answer why it exists. And saying the universe had a beginning immediately raises another question:

What caused it?

Whatever ultimately explains the universe would need to exist beyond the physical universe itself. It couldn't simply be another physical thing requiring the same explanation. Christianity proposes that the ultimate explanation isn't something. It's Someone. An eternal Creator who doesn't depend on the universe for His existence but

from whom the universe receives its existence. The Bible opens with a remarkably simple statement:

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

Genesis 1:1

The Bible doesn't begin by attempting to prove God. It begins with God as the explanation for why anything exists at all.

CLUE #2: THE UNIVERSE IS REMARKABLY ORDERED

The universe isn't merely here. It operates according to consistent patterns and laws that human beings can discover, describe, and use to make predictions. That alone is fascinating. But there is another observation. The conditions necessary for complex life depend upon an extraordinary combination of physical realities. If certain features of our universe were significantly different, life as we know it could not exist. So why does the universe have the kind of order that allows conscious beings like us to exist and investigate it? There are different ways people answer that question. Some say chance.

Some propose that there may be many universes and we happen to inhabit one capable of supporting life. Others see the order of the universe as evidence pointing toward intelligence. Christianity says the universe looks intelligible because it came from an intelligent Creator. The Bible puts it poetically:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Psalm 19:1

Creation isn't God. But Christians believe creation bears the fingerprints of its Creator.

CLUE #3: WE BELIEVE SOME THINGS REALLY ARE WRONG

Imagine someone stealing food because they're starving. Now imagine someone deliberately torturing a child for entertainment. Most of us instinctively recognize that these aren't simply two behaviors we personally dislike. We believe there are things that are actually wrong. Human trafficking is wrong. Racism is wrong. Abusing the vulnerable is wrong. Murdering innocent people is wrong. And we don't usually mean:

"I personally don't prefer those things."

We mean:

"People ought not do those things."

But that raises a deeper question.

Where does "ought" come from?

Societies certainly influence moral beliefs. Cultures sometimes disagree about what is right and wrong. Human beings also reason about how actions harm or help others. But if morality is ultimately nothing more than personal preference, biology, or social agreement, then morality can change whenever preferences or societies change. Christianity proposes another possibility: There are real moral truths because there is a moral God. Our sense that some things really are good and others really are evil may be another clue pointing beyond ourselves.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible acknowledges that God cannot be reduced to something we can physically see. But it also says God hasn't left Himself completely hidden. Paul writes:

> "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."

Romans 1:20

The idea is simple: We can't see God directly, but we can see things that point toward Him. You don't see gravity itself. You observe its effects. You don't see someone's mind. You encounter words, decisions, creativity, and actions that reveal there is a mind behind them. In a similar way, the Bible says creation points beyond itself toward its Creator. But the Bible goes further. It says God isn't simply a distant force responsible for starting the universe. He is personal. He created human beings to know Him.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Acts 17:22–31. In this passage, Paul is speaking in Athens to people with very different religious and philosophical beliefs. Notice how he begins. He doesn't insult them. He doesn't assume they already understand the Bible. He begins with things they already recognize about life and the world around them and then invites them to consider God. Talk about it:

How does Paul describe God?

According to this passage, what is God's relationship to creation?

What does Paul say about God's relationship to humanity?

Why do you think Paul says God is "not far from any one of us"?

What questions does this passage raise for you?

LOOK AT JESUS

At this point we need to make an important distinction. Evidence from the universe might lead someone to believe there is a God. But it can't necessarily tell us everything about who God is. You could look at a painting and reasonably conclude there was a painter. But staring at the painting wouldn't tell you the painter's name, personality, or whether they wanted a relationship with you. For that, the artist would need to reveal themselves. Christianity makes an extraordinary claim: God has. Jesus said:

> "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9

This is where Christianity moves beyond general arguments for God's existence. Christianity doesn't merely say: Look at the universe and believe there's something out there. It says: Look at Jesus and discover what God is like. Jesus claimed that the God behind the universe isn't merely a force, energy, or distant intelligence. He is a Father who wants to be known. Which means the ultimate Christian answer to "How can I know God exists?" isn't simply an argument. It's a person. Jesus. We'll explore who He is in our next conversation.

WRESTLE WITH IT

BUT DOESN'T SCIENCE EXPLAIN THE UNIVERSE WITHOUT GOD?

Science has given us extraordinary knowledge about the universe. It can investigate the development of stars. Study biological life. Map the human genome. Explore the brain. Describe physical laws. And Christians shouldn't fear any of that. If God created reality, discovering more about reality shouldn't threaten faith. The important distinction is between questions of mechanism and questions of ultimate explanation. Suppose someone asks why a pot of water is boiling. You could answer: Because heat energy is causing the water molecules to move more rapidly. That's true. But someone else could answer:

Because I'm making coffee. That's also true. The explanations aren't necessarily competing. One explains a mechanism. The other explains intention. In the same way, explaining more about how the universe operates doesn't automatically answer why there is a universe capable of operating that way in the first place. Science and belief in God only become enemies if we insist that one must answer every kind of question. Christianity doesn't ask us to reject science. It asks us to consider whether the universe science investigates ultimately points beyond itself.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Maya's question:

"I'm not against believing. I just need a reason to."

Maybe that's where you are. Maybe you already believe strongly in God. Maybe you're skeptical. Maybe you want to believe but aren't sure you can. Or maybe your struggle isn't intellectual at all. Perhaps something happened in your life that made you wonder:

If God exists, where was He?

We'll eventually talk about that question too. For now, talk honestly:

Which of the clues in this chapter did you find most compelling? Why?

Which did you find least compelling?

What do you think is the strongest reason for believing God exists?

What do you think is the strongest reason for doubting?

Do you think your questions about God are mostly intellectual, personal, or both?

If God really exists, would you want to know Him?

That last question might be more important than it first appears. Because there is a difference between asking:

"Does God exist?"

and asking:

"If He does, do I want to know Him?"

TRY THIS

For the next seven days, pay attention. Look at the world around you. The night sky. Another person. Beauty. Conscience. Love. The complexity of life. Your own desire for meaning. Don't force any conclusions. Just ask:

"What explanation makes the most sense of the world I'm actually experiencing?"

And continue the simple prayer from our last conversation:

"God, if You're real, help me recognize You."

But this week, add one more sentence:

"And if You want to be known, show me what You're like."

Because Christianity makes an astonishing claim. The God we're searching for hasn't remained hidden. He stepped into human history. Which brings us to our next question.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 03

Who Is Jesus?

Who was Jesus, and why does He matter?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Ethan didn't have a problem with Jesus. In fact, he liked a lot of what Jesus stood for. Love people. Forgive your enemies. Care for the poor. Don't be judgmental. As far as Ethan was concerned, Jesus was one of history's great teachers—a spiritual leader whose ideas had shaped the world. What bothered him was what Christians had done with Jesus. Why turn a good teacher into God?

One afternoon a friend asked Ethan a simple question: "Have you ever actually read what Jesus said about Himself?" Ethan realized he hadn't. Most of what he believed about Jesus had come from other people—churches he'd attended as a kid, things he'd seen online, conversations with friends, and his own assumptions. He knew what he thought about Jesus. He wasn't sure he actually knew Jesus.

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Few people have influenced human history like Jesus of Nazareth. More than two thousand years after His life, people around the world still gather because of Him, pray in His name, study His words, and attempt to follow His teachings. Even people who reject Christianity often admire Jesus. But admiration isn't the same as understanding. It's possible to respect Jesus while never seriously considering what He actually claimed.

Was He simply a great moral teacher?

A prophet?

A religious reformer?

A revolutionary?

A legend created by His followers?

Or was He who Christians claim He was—God entering human history?

Before deciding what we believe about Jesus, perhaps the fairest thing we can do is allow Jesus to speak for Himself. Because if Jesus really is who He claimed to be, then He isn't simply an interesting figure from history. He may be the most important person you will ever encounter.

TALK ABOUT IT

Before opening the Bible, talk about the Jesus you already have in your mind.

When you hear the name Jesus, what comes to mind?

Who have you always believed Jesus was?

Where did your understanding of Jesus come from?

What do you admire about Jesus?

Is there anything about Jesus or Christianity that makes you uncomfortable?

If you could ask Jesus one question and know He would answer you, what would you ask? Don't worry about giving the "Christian answer." The purpose of this conversation is honesty.

THINK ABOUT IT

Before asking whether Jesus is God, we should begin somewhere simpler.

Did Jesus actually exist?

Among historians, Jesus of Nazareth is not generally treated as a fictional character. Jesus was a Jewish man who lived in the first century. He taught publicly, gathered followers, and was crucified under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Christian sources obviously tell us much more about Him, but the basic historical existence of Jesus isn't dependent upon believing the Bible is inspired. So the more interesting historical question isn't:

Did Jesus exist?

It's:

Who was He?

And that's where things become fascinating.

JESUS DOESN'T FIT EASILY INTO OUR CATEGORIES

If you read the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—you quickly discover something unusual. Jesus certainly taught people how to live. But He did much more than that. He spoke as someone possessing extraordinary authority. He forgave sins. He welcomed society's outsiders. He challenged religious leaders. He claimed authority over the Sabbath. He spoke about God as His Father in an extraordinary way. He received

worship. He claimed He would ultimately judge humanity. And He repeatedly placed people's response to Himself at the center of their relationship with God. Jesus didn't merely say:

"Here is the truth."

He said:

"I am the way and the truth and the life."

John 14:6

He didn't simply tell people where to find spiritual life. He said:

"I am the resurrection and the life."

John 11:25

He didn't merely claim to know God. He said:

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9

Those aren't ordinary claims. Jesus wasn't simply asking people to adopt His philosophy. He was asking people to trust Him.

CONSIDER THIS...

Suppose someone today told you:

"I can forgive your sins."

"Your eternal destiny depends upon your response to me."

"If you have seen me, you have seen God."

You probably wouldn't respond:

"What a wonderful moral teacher."

You would want to know whether that person had the authority to say such things. That's the tension Jesus creates. We sometimes make Jesus easier to deal with by reducing Him to someone who taught us to love each other. Jesus certainly taught love. But the Jesus presented in the Gospels is much more disruptive than that. He didn't simply claim to teach us about God. He claimed to reveal God.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

One of the clearest descriptions of Jesus appears at the beginning of John's Gospel. John writes:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John 1:1

Then a few verses later:

> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John 1:14

John is making an enormous claim. The God who created everything didn't remain distant from His creation. He entered it. The invisible became visible. The eternal entered time. God came near. This is what Christians mean by the incarnation. God didn't merely send humanity another set of instructions. He came Himself.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read John 1:1–18 together. Don't rush through it. Pay attention to the words John uses to describe Jesus. Then talk about it:

What does John claim about Jesus?

What do you think John means when he calls Jesus "the Word"?

What does this passage say Jesus reveals about God?

What surprises you about the way John describes Jesus?

If John's claims are true, how would that change the way you think about Jesus?

LOOK AT JESUS

There's a scene in the Gospels where Jesus turns the question directly toward His followers. He asks:

> "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

Matthew 16:13

His disciples give Him several answers. Some thought He was John the Baptist. Others Elijah. Others Jeremiah or another prophet. In other words, everyone had an opinion about Jesus. That hasn't changed much. But then Jesus makes the conversation personal:

> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Matthew 16:15

That's the question Christianity eventually puts before every person. Not:

Who does your family say Jesus is?

Not:

Who does your church say Jesus is?

Not:

Who does your professor say Jesus is?

Not:

Who does social media say Jesus is?

But:

Who do you say Jesus is?

Peter responds:

> "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:16

Jesus doesn't correct him. He affirms him.

WHAT WAS JESUS LIKE?

Before we reduce this discussion to claims and arguments, there's another way to explore Jesus: Watch how He treated people. Jesus was remarkably difficult to categorize. He was tender toward broken people and confrontational toward self-righteous people. He touched people others avoided. He ate with people religious society rejected. He defended the vulnerable. He welcomed children. He confronted hypocrisy. He wept with grieving friends. He forgave His enemies. He treated women with dignity in a culture where they were often marginalized. He showed compassion toward the sick.

And yet He never seemed afraid to speak difficult truth. Jesus wasn't simply loving or truthful. He was both. He possessed conviction without cruelty. Compassion without compromise. Authority without arrogance. Strength without exploitation. Grace without pretending sin didn't matter. The people considered "sinners" often wanted to be near Him. The religiously self-righteous were often threatened by Him. That alone is worth thinking about.

What kind of person produces both reactions?

WRESTLE WITH IT

COULDN'T JESUS HAVE JUST BEEN A GREAT TEACHER?

That's certainly one possibility people suggest. But it creates a problem. A great moral teacher should tell the truth. And Jesus made extraordinary claims about Himself. If the Gospel accounts accurately represent His claims, then we're left with a question:

Was Jesus telling the truth?

Perhaps He was wrong about Himself. Perhaps His followers misunderstood or exaggerated His claims. Perhaps the Gospel accounts can't be trusted. Or perhaps Jesus really was who He claimed to be. Those possibilities deserve serious consideration. And that's exactly why our next conversation will ask:

Can we trust the documents that tell us about Jesus?

For now, don't rush to an answer. Just recognize that calling Jesus "a good teacher" doesn't completely resolve the issue. Jesus' claims demand something more.

BUT WHAT ABOUT CHRISTIANS?

For some people, the biggest obstacle to Jesus isn't Jesus. It's Christians. Maybe you've watched Christians behave hypocritically. Maybe someone used religion to control you. Maybe a church hurt you. Maybe you've seen Christians act judgmental, arrogant, political, greedy, or completely unlike the Jesus they claim to follow. Those experiences shouldn't be dismissed. But consider an important distinction: Jesus should ultimately be evaluated by Jesus. Someone failing to follow His teachings doesn't necessarily make His teachings false.

In fact, sometimes the behavior that bothers us most about Christians bothers us precisely because it looks so unlike Jesus. So if Christianity has disappointed you, perhaps the invitation isn't to ignore those experiences. It's to look beyond Christians for a moment and examine Christ Himself. Don't reject Jesus because someone else represented Him poorly. See Him for yourself.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Ethan. He had an opinion about Jesus without realizing how little time he'd spent actually listening to Jesus. Maybe that's true for many of us. We inherit assumptions. From parents. Churches. Friends. Professors. Social media. Culture. Good experiences. Bad experiences. But eventually the question becomes personal.

Who do you believe Jesus is?

Talk about it:

Has anything in this chapter challenged your previous picture of Jesus?

Which claim Jesus made about Himself stands out most to you?

What do you find most compelling about Jesus?

What do you find hardest to believe?

Have the actions of Christians affected how you view Jesus? How?

If Jesus really is God revealing Himself to humanity, what would that mean for you? You don't have to force an answer. But don't avoid the question either. Because Jesus Himself asks it:

"Who do you say I am?"

TRY THIS

For the next seven days, don't rely on what someone else says about Jesus. Go directly to one of the earliest accounts of His life. Start reading the Gospel of John. Read one chapter each day. As you read, ask three simple questions:

What does Jesus say?

What does Jesus do?

What does this show me about who Jesus is?

Don't read looking for what you're supposed to believe. Read like you're meeting someone. And continue the prayer we've been praying:

"God, if You're real, help me recognize You."

"If You want to be known, show me what You're like."

And now add:

"Jesus, help me see You for who You really are."

Because if Jesus really is who He claimed to be, there may be no more important discovery you could make. But that raises an obvious question. Everything we've learned about Jesus comes through ancient documents.

Can we actually trust them?

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 04

Can I Trust The Bible?

Is the Bible reliable enough to build my beliefs and life upon?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Sophie had heard people quote the Bible her entire life. Sometimes the words were comforting. Other times they were confusing. But the older she got, the more questions she had. Who actually wrote this book? How do we know what they originally said? Hasn't it been translated so many times that the original meaning must have been lost? And who decided which books made it into the Bible anyway?

One evening, Sophie was talking with a Christian friend who mentioned something Jesus had said. She responded almost instinctively: "But you're using the Bible to prove the Bible. How do you even know we can trust what it says about Jesus?" Her friend paused and said, "That's actually a really good question. Maybe instead of assuming the Bible is true, we should start by asking whether there are good reasons to take it seriously."

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

That's an important distinction. Christians often begin conversations with:

> "The Bible says…"

But someone who isn't sure about Christianity may reasonably respond:

> "Why should I care what the Bible says?"

If the Bible is simply a collection of legends, religious opinions, and stories that changed over centuries, then building your life upon it would be difficult to justify. But if the Bible reliably connects us to real people, places, events, and ultimately to Jesus, then it deserves serious consideration. The question isn't whether you already believe every word is inspired by God. We don't need to begin there. Let's start with a more basic question:

Is the Bible historically reliable enough to deserve our attention?

And perhaps an even more personal one:

Can I trust the Bible enough to actually listen to what it says?

TALK ABOUT IT

Before considering evidence, talk about your experience with the Bible.

What has your experience with the Bible been?

Did you grow up reading it, hearing it, ignoring it, or questioning it?

What have you heard about where the Bible came from?

What makes you skeptical about the Bible?

Has someone ever used the Bible in a way that helped or hurt you?

What would you need to know before you could consider the Bible trustworthy?

THINK ABOUT IT

One reason conversations about the Bible become confusing is that people sometimes talk about it as though a finished book simply dropped out of heaven. It didn't. The Bible is actually a collection of writings produced by many authors across many centuries in different historical settings. It contains history, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, letters, biographies, and more. So rather than asking only:

> "Can I trust the Bible?"

It can help to break that question into smaller ones.

Were these writings connected to real history?

Were they carefully preserved?

Do we have good reason to believe the text we read reflects what the original authors wrote?

How did these writings become recognized as Scripture?

And what did the earliest witnesses claim about Jesus?

Let's consider a few clues.

CLUE #1: THE BIBLE PRESENTS ITSELF IN HISTORY

The Bible doesn't generally describe events in a vague imaginary world. It names places. Kings. Governors. Cities. Empires. Political leaders. Geographical locations. Historical events. Consider how Luke begins his account of Jesus. He tells his reader that he investigated the events carefully, consulted material handed down by eyewitnesses, and wrote an orderly account so his reader could know the certainty of what he had been taught. Read his words:

> "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning."

Luke 1:3

That's an interesting statement. Luke isn't asking his reader to believe something merely because it feels spiritually meaningful. He's making claims about events he believes occurred in history. Later, when Luke describes the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, he identifies political and religious figures surrounding the events.

Why?

Because Christianity is making historical claims. The Christian faith isn't merely built around ideas. It is built around events Christians claim actually happened. Jesus lived. Jesus taught. Jesus was crucified. And His followers claimed He rose from the dead. If those things didn't happen, Christianity has a serious problem. The Bible itself recognizes that.

CLUE #2: WE HAVE MANY ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS

Here's a common idea:

> "The Bible has been translated and retranslated so many times that we have no idea what the original said."

It sounds reasonable. But that's not actually how modern Bible translation works. English translations aren't generally made by translating an old English translation into newer English, after centuries of a telephone game. Scholars work from ancient manuscripts in the Bible's original languages—primarily Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We don't possess the original physical pages written by biblical authors. But we do possess many ancient manuscript copies, portions, and quotations that allow scholars to compare the surviving textual evidence. And yes, there are differences among manuscripts.

Most are small—things like spelling, word order, or accidental copying differences. A smaller number involve larger textual questions, and modern Bibles often identify significant cases in footnotes. That's important. Trust doesn't require pretending questions don't exist. In fact, the enormous amount of manuscript evidence allows scholars to identify and examine those differences rather than simply guessing what the text originally said. The issue isn't:

> "Are there any differences between ancient manuscripts?"

There are. The better question is:

> "Do those differences prevent us from knowing, with substantial confidence, what the biblical authors wrote?"

And the evidence gives strong reason to believe that the text has been preserved well enough for us to meaningfully investigate its claims.

CLUE #3: THE BIBLE WASN'T WRITTEN BY ONE PERSON IN ONE PLACE

This is one of the most interesting features of the Bible. It's not one person's spiritual journal. It's a library. Its writings emerged across different generations and circumstances. Yet a remarkable storyline runs through them: Creation. Human rebellion. Promise. Covenant. Rescue. Redemption. Restoration. And at the center of the Christian understanding of that story is Jesus. The Bible begins with creation and ends with creation restored. Between those two moments is the story of a God pursuing humanity. That doesn't prove divine inspiration by itself.

But it helps explain why Christians don't view the Bible merely as a collection of unrelated religious sayings. They see one unfolding story.

CLUE #4: THE BIBLE IS SURPRISINGLY HONEST ABOUT ITS PEOPLE

If you were inventing propaganda to make your religious heroes look impressive, the Bible is a strange way to do it. Its heroes are deeply flawed. Noah gets drunk. Abraham lies. Jacob deceives. Moses loses his temper. David commits adultery and arranges a man's death. Elijah becomes afraid. Jonah runs from God. Peter denies Jesus. The disciples argue over which of them is greatest. The early churches struggle with division, sexual sin, pride, greed, prejudice, and bad theology. The Bible doesn't airbrush its characters. Even its greatest leaders need grace.

Why?

Because ultimately the Bible isn't a story about how good people find God. It's a story about how a good God pursues broken people.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ITSELF?

Christians eventually make a claim that goes beyond historical reliability. They believe God speaks through Scripture. Paul writes:

> "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

2 Timothy 3:16

The phrase "God-breathed" describes Scripture as originating ultimately from God. But that doesn't mean biblical authors became mindless machines. Their personalities

remain visible. Their writing styles differ. They write from particular cultures and circumstances. Christianity claims that God worked through real human authors so that their writings communicate what He intended. Peter describes it this way:

> "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

2 Peter 1:21

So Christians believe the Bible is simultaneously deeply human and divinely given. But notice something important for our conversation. You don't have to begin by believing that. You can investigate the Bible before you've decided what you believe about its inspiration. Read it. Question it. Study its history. Examine its claims. And most importantly, encounter the person standing at the center of its story.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Luke 1:1–4 and John 20:24–31 together. Notice the different things these writers say about why they wrote. Then talk about it:

What does Luke say about how he approached writing his account?

Why does John say he recorded the signs of Jesus?

Do these writers sound as though they believe they're describing real events?

Why do you think eyewitness testimony mattered to the earliest Christians?

What questions would you want to ask Luke or John if you could sit across a table from them?

LOOK AT JESUS

Here's where this question becomes especially important. Christians don't ultimately love the Bible simply because it's an ancient book. They love it because they believe the Bible leads us to Jesus. Jesus Himself treated the Scriptures with tremendous seriousness. He quoted them. He taught from them. He used them when facing temptation. He said they pointed toward God's purposes. After His resurrection, Jesus spoke with two disciples who were struggling to understand what had happened. Luke says:

> "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Luke 24:27

Imagine that conversation. Jesus is essentially saying: You've been reading the story. Now let Me show you where it's been heading. That's one of the central Christian

convictions about the Bible. The Bible isn't ultimately a book of rules to follow. It's a story that leads us to a Person. Jesus.

WRESTLE WITH IT

BUT HASN'T THE BIBLE BEEN CHANGED OVER TIME?

This question deserves more than a dismissive answer. Ancient documents were copied by hand. Copyists made mistakes. Manuscripts contain variations. Those are facts. But that doesn't mean someone repeatedly rewrote the entire Bible until its original message disappeared. Because many manuscripts survived from different places and periods, scholars can compare them. Imagine ten students were given the same paragraph and told to copy it. One accidentally leaves out a word. Another misspells something. Another reverses two words. If you only had one copy, determining the original might be difficult.

But if you had many independent copies to compare, the differences themselves could help you identify what the original most likely said. Ancient textual criticism is much more complicated than that illustration, but the principle helps. The existence of manuscript differences isn't evidence that we know nothing. Comparison is part of how scholars determine the earliest recoverable wording. Good modern Bible translations don't hide significant textual questions either. You'll often find them noted directly on the page. That transparency should encourage investigation, not fear of it.

BUT WHO DECIDED WHICH BOOKS GOT INTO THE BIBLE?

Another common picture is that centuries after Jesus, powerful religious leaders gathered in a room and decided which books would become the Bible. The actual process was much more gradual. Early Christians were already reading, sharing, copying, and treating certain writings as authoritative long before later church councils formally listed the books of Scripture. When Christians considered New Testament writings, several questions mattered.

Was this connected to the apostles or their close associates?

Was it consistent with the message about Jesus the churches had received?

Was it widely recognized and used among Christian communities?

The church's role wasn't simply to make arbitrary writings authoritative. Christians understood themselves as recognizing writings that already carried authority within the believing community. There were discussions and disagreements around some books.

That shouldn't surprise us. It should remind us that the Bible has a real history. Faith doesn't require us to erase that history. It invites us to examine it.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Sophie's question:

> "How do I even know we can trust what it says about Jesus?"

That's a fair question. Maybe you've always trusted the Bible. Maybe you've always doubted it. Maybe you've never really investigated it. Or maybe someone told you that asking questions about the Bible demonstrated a lack of faith. It doesn't. Truth doesn't need to fear investigation. Talk honestly:

What is your biggest question about the Bible?

Did anything in this conversation challenge something you previously assumed?

What evidence would you want to investigate further?

Do you think it's possible to take the Bible seriously before believing it's inspired?

Have you ever read one of the Gospels from beginning to end for yourself?

What would keep you from doing that?

And perhaps the most important question: If the Bible really could help you discover who Jesus is, would you be willing to read it with an open mind?

TRY THIS

Continue reading the Gospel of John. But this time, try reading it in two ways at once. First, read like an investigator. Ask:

What is this writer claiming happened?

What details does he give?

What questions does the text raise?

Write those questions down. Don't hide from them. Then read like a seeker. Ask:

What does this show me about Jesus?

You don't have to decide ahead of time that everything you're reading is true. Just give the text the opportunity to speak for itself. And continue our simple prayer:

> "God, if You're real, help me recognize You."

> "If You want to be known, show me what You're like."

> "Jesus, help me see You for who You really are."

And now:

"God, if You have spoken through these words, help me hear You."

Because if the Bible is telling the truth, it also tells us something uncomfortable. Something has gone terribly wrong with the world.

And if we're honest…

something has gone wrong inside us too.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 05

Why Is The World So Broken?

If God is good, why is there suffering, evil, and brokenness?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Daniel sat in the hospital waiting room staring at a vending machine he wasn't really seeing. A few hours earlier, his sister had called to tell him their dad had collapsed. Now doctors were using words like cancer, advanced, and treatment options. His father was a good man. He had spent his life caring for his family, helping neighbors, and trying to do the right thing. None of this seemed fair.

A few days later someone told Daniel, "Everything happens for a reason." They meant well, but the words made him angry. Driving home that night, Daniel finally said out loud what he'd been thinking: "God, if You're really there, why would You let this happen?" And then came the harder question: "If You could stop this and You don't, how can You possibly be good?"

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Eventually, suffering stops being philosophical. It gets a name. A diagnosis. A phone call. A betrayal. A miscarriage. A war. An addiction. An accident. A funeral. A child who was abused. A relationship that falls apart. A prayer that seems unanswered. When suffering becomes personal, simple answers usually aren't enough.

If God is all-powerful, couldn't He stop suffering?

If God is good, wouldn't He want to?

And if He is both loving and powerful, why is the world like this?

This may be one of the strongest objections to belief in God. And the Bible doesn't pretend otherwise. In fact, some of the Bible's most emotional passages are people asking God exactly these kinds of questions.

"Why?"

"How long?"

"Where are You?"

Christianity doesn't ask us to pretend suffering isn't painful. It asks us to consider a different possibility: What if the brokenness of the world isn't evidence that God doesn't care—but evidence that the world isn't the way God intended it to be?

TALK ABOUT IT

This conversation may become more personal than the previous ones. Don't rush it. Listen before trying to explain.

What experience with suffering has most shaped the way you think about God?

Have you ever been angry with God? Why?

What kind of suffering is hardest for you to understand?

Do you think suffering makes belief in God harder? Why?

What answers have people given you about suffering that were helpful—or unhelpful?

If you could ask God one question about suffering, what would it be?

Sometimes the best response to someone's pain isn't an answer. It's presence.

THINK ABOUT IT

Before asking why God allows suffering, we should notice something important. When we see certain things happen, we don't merely say:

> "I don't like that."

We say:

> "That shouldn't happen."

Children shouldn't get cancer. People shouldn't be trafficked. Women shouldn't be abused. Families shouldn't starve. People shouldn't murder one another. Racism is wrong. Cruelty is wrong. Exploitation is wrong. We don't simply experience suffering. We protest it. Something inside us recognizes that the world isn't the way it should be. But that raises an interesting question.

Where does our idea of "should" come from?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL CUTS BOTH WAYS

Evil certainly creates a difficult question for belief in God. But evil also raises a difficult question if there is no God. If the universe is ultimately the product of impersonal forces

with no Creator and no objective moral reality beyond humanity, on what basis can we say something is truly evil rather than simply something our culture strongly dislikes? We can certainly describe suffering. We can explain its biological or social effects. We can agree together that certain actions harm human flourishing. But when we call something evil, we usually mean something stronger. We mean: This should not be.

Christianity agrees. The Bible's explanation isn't that suffering is imaginary. It's that our outrage at evil reflects something true: The world really isn't the way it was meant to be.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible begins with a world without funerals. No cancer. No murder. No exploitation. No shame. No separation from God. Genesis repeatedly describes creation as good. Human beings are made in God's image and given freedom to live in relationship with Him. But love requires something important. Freedom. If human beings are genuinely free to love, they must also be capable of refusing love. And that's exactly what the biblical story says happened. Humanity chose independence from God. The Bible calls this sin. Sin isn't merely breaking religious rules. At its core, sin is humanity saying:

"I will decide what is good for myself. I will live life on my terms rather than God's."

That rebellion fractures everything. Our relationship with God. Our relationship with ourselves. Our relationships with one another. And even our relationship with creation. The Bible describes a world that is now good—but broken. Beautiful—but fractured. Full of life—but marked by death.

THE BROKENNESS AROUND US—AND WITHIN US

It's tempting to think the world's problem is simply bad people out there. If we could eliminate the right politicians, criminals, corporations, ideologies, religions, nations, or systems, perhaps we could fix everything. But Jesus pushes the problem closer to home. He says:

"For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come."

Mark 7:21

That's uncomfortable. Because the biblical diagnosis isn't merely: The world is broken. It's: We are broken too. We don't just suffer because of other people's selfishness. Other people sometimes suffer because of ours. We've lied. We've wounded people. We've acted selfishly. We've judged. We've used people. We've withheld forgiveness. We've chosen ourselves over others. The scale may differ dramatically, but the same human capacity for self-centeredness exists within all of us. Paul summarizes it:

> "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:23

Christianity doesn't divide humanity into good people and bad people. It says we're all people made in God's image who are also deeply affected by sin. We are simultaneously more valuable and more broken than we often realize.

BUT DOES SIN EXPLAIN EVERYTHING?

Not completely. Some suffering is clearly connected to human choices. War. Abuse. Violence. Corruption. Betrayal. Much of human suffering exists because people use their freedom to hurt other people.

But what about earthquakes?

Disease?

Genetic disorders?

Cancer?

Storms?

What about suffering no human being appears to have chosen?

The Bible describes sin as having affected not only human hearts but creation itself. Paul writes:

> "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

Romans 8:22

That's an interesting picture. Creation is groaning. Something is wrong. But childbirth contains another idea. Something is coming. The Christian story isn't simply: Creation → Sin → Brokenness. It's: Creation → Sin → Redemption → Restoration. God isn't abandoning His broken creation. He's restoring it.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Genesis 3:1–19 and Romans 8:18–25 together. As you read, look for both brokenness and hope. Then talk about it:

What changes after humanity turns away from God?

What relationships become fractured?

How does Romans describe the condition of creation?

What do you think it means that creation is "groaning"?

Where do you see evidence of that groaning in the world today?

What hope does Paul see beyond the suffering?

LOOK AT JESUS

This is where Christianity's answer to suffering becomes different from a purely philosophical explanation. God doesn't stand far away from human suffering and shout answers. He enters it. Jesus knows betrayal. His friends abandoned Him. He knows grief. He wept at the grave of His friend Lazarus. He knows injustice. He was falsely accused. He knows physical pain. He was beaten and crucified. He knows rejection. Crowds that once celebrated Him later demanded His death. He even knows what it feels like to cry out:

> "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Matthew 27:46

Christianity makes an astonishing claim. The God we accuse of not caring about suffering entered our suffering Himself. Jesus doesn't answer every question about why a particular tragedy happened. Instead, He shows us something about God's response to suffering. God is not indifferent. God is not distant. God has scars.

JESUS AT A FUNERAL

There's a moment in John's Gospel that gives us a remarkable picture of God. Jesus' friend Lazarus dies. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus' sisters are devastated. One of them essentially asks the question Daniel asked:

> "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

In other words:

You could have stopped this. Why didn't You?

Jesus knows what He's about to do. He's going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Yet when Jesus sees everyone grieving, He doesn't begin with a theological explanation. He does something surprisingly human.

> "Jesus wept."

John 11:35

Don't miss that. Jesus knows resurrection is coming. And He still weeps. Christian hope doesn't mean pretending pain isn't painful. We can grieve and still have hope. We can

question and still have faith. We can weep and still believe. Sometimes the most Christlike response to suffering isn't explaining it. It's entering it with someone.

WRESTLE WITH IT

BUT WHY DOESN'T GOD JUST STOP EVIL?

That's the difficult question.

Couldn't God stop every evil action?

Yes. But consider what that might require. For God to prevent every morally wrong action, He would need to continually override human freedom. Stop every lie before it's spoken. Stop every hateful thought before it becomes action. Stop every selfish decision. Every act of greed. Every betrayal. Every moment of pride. Every cruel word.

And where exactly should God draw the line?

At murder?

Abuse?

Lying?

Gossip?

Greed?

Hatred?

Selfishness?

If God removed every person capable of contributing to the world's brokenness...

would any of us remain?

The freedom that makes love possible also creates the possibility of rejection, selfishness, and evil. That doesn't answer every question about suffering. There are mysteries we may never fully understand in this life. Christianity doesn't offer a neat explanation for every tragedy. It offers something else: A God who enters our suffering. A cross where God confronts evil. A resurrection where death begins to lose its power. And a promise that brokenness will not have the final word.

DOES GOD CAUSE EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS?

Christians sometimes say:

> "Everything happens for a reason."

Often, they're trying to comfort someone. But the statement can easily sound like God directly caused every tragedy. The Bible gives us a more complicated picture. God is sovereign. Nothing is beyond His ability to redeem. But Scripture also describes events God hates. Sin. Violence. Injustice. Rebellion. Death. Jesus taught us to pray:

> "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Matthew 6:10

That prayer itself tells us something. Not everything happening on earth currently reflects God's desire for His creation. Christian hope isn't that every terrible thing is secretly good. It's that God is so good He can bring redemption even out of things that are genuinely terrible. God doesn't call evil good. He promises evil won't win.

WHERE IS GOD WHEN WE SUFFER?

Maybe the question isn't only:

> "Why did God allow this?"

Sometimes the question underneath it is:

> "Where is God while I'm going through it?"

The Bible's answer is repeatedly: Near. The Psalms say:

> "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted."

Psalm 34:18

Jesus enters suffering. The Holy Spirit is called the Comforter. And God repeatedly sends His people toward those who hurt. Sometimes God's presence arrives through another person sitting beside us. A meal. A phone call. A prayer. A hospital visit. Someone who doesn't try to fix the pain. Someone who simply refuses to let us carry it alone.

THE STORY ISN'T OVER

The final chapters of the Bible contain one of Christianity's greatest promises. John describes a future where God fully restores creation:

> "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."

Revelation 21:4

Notice what Christianity promises. Not escape from creation. Restoration of creation. Not souls floating forever somewhere far away. A renewed world where God dwells with His people. Everything sin fractured is healed. Everything evil stole is restored. Every tear is

wiped away. Every injustice is ultimately confronted. And death itself dies. Christianity doesn't deny the darkness. It declares that darkness doesn't get the final word.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Daniel in the hospital waiting room. Maybe you've sat somewhere like that. Maybe your story isn't cancer. Maybe it's divorce. Abuse. Loss. Loneliness. Betrayal. Infertility. Depression. An unanswered prayer. The death of someone you loved. Maybe the question "Why?" isn't philosophical for you at all. You don't need to minimize that pain in order to explore faith. Bring it into the conversation.

What part of suffering is hardest for you to reconcile with belief in God?

Does the biblical picture of a broken creation make sense of anything you've experienced?

How does it affect you to think that Jesus experienced suffering Himself?

What's the difference between saying "everything that happens is good" and "God can redeem what happens"?

Are there places in your life where you're still angry with God?

What would it look like to bring that anger honestly to Him?

And one more question:

If God could ultimately heal everything that's broken, would you want Him to?

TRY THIS

This week, don't pretend everything is okay. Choose one place of brokenness in your life or in the world that genuinely troubles you. Name it. Then pray honestly. You don't need religious language. You could simply say:

"God, I don't understand why this happened."

"I don't understand why You allowed it."

"But if You're there, meet me in it."

And then do something else. Look for someone else who is hurting. Don't try to explain their suffering. Don't tell them everything happens for a reason. Don't rush to fix them. Just be present. Listen. Care. Serve. Because perhaps one way God begins confronting the world's brokenness is through ordinary people who refuse to walk past it. But the brokenness of the world raises another question.

If humanity needs rescuing…

why does Christianity insist that Jesus is the answer?

There are billions of religious people around the world.

Could all these religions simply be different roads leading to the same place?

That's our next conversation.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 06

Why Jesus?

Aren't all religions basically different paths to the same God?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Alex grew up around Christianity, but some of his closest friends came from very different backgrounds. One was Muslim. Another practiced Buddhism. A coworker described herself as spiritual but not religious. They were thoughtful, sincere people who cared about their families and tried to live good lives. The more Alex got to know them, the harder it became to understand why Christians would claim that Jesus was the only way to God.

One night over dinner, the conversation turned toward religion. Someone finally said what Alex had been thinking: "Aren't religions basically saying the same thing? Be a good person. Love people. Believe in something bigger than yourself. Maybe we're all just taking different roads up the same mountain." Everyone around the table seemed to agree. Alex understood why. It sounded humble, tolerant, and reasonable. But another question stayed with him: What if the religions themselves don't actually say that?

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

We live in a religiously diverse world. Our neighbors, coworkers, classmates, teammates, and friends may believe very different things about God. That can make Christianity's claims about Jesus uncomfortable. Jesus said:

> "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6

That sounds incredibly exclusive.

Why Jesus?

Why not Muhammad?

Buddha?

Hinduism?

Spirituality?

Or simply being a good person?

Would a loving God really provide only one way?

Those are fair questions. And answering them requires both conviction and humility. Christians should never treat people of other faiths with disrespect. Every person deserves dignity, kindness, freedom, and genuine friendship. But respecting someone's beliefs doesn't require pretending all beliefs are identical. In fact, taking another person's faith seriously means listening carefully to what they actually believe. So let's begin there.

TALK ABOUT IT

Before trying to answer the question, talk about your own experience.

What religions or spiritual beliefs have you encountered?

Do you think all religions are basically teaching the same thing? Why?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable with Christianity claiming Jesus is the only way to God?

What do you think makes a religious belief true?

Do you think sincerity is enough to make something true?

What would a loving God need to be like in order for you to trust Him?

THINK ABOUT IT

The statement "all religions are basically the same" sounds respectful. But there's a problem. The religions themselves don't claim to be the same. They make very different claims about some of life's biggest questions.

Who—or what—is God?

What is wrong with humanity?

What happens after death?

What is salvation?

How do we find peace?

Is there one God, many gods, or no personal God at all?

Who is Jesus?

The answers aren't simply different versions of the same idea. Sometimes they directly contradict one another.

DIFFERENT ROADS—BUT ARE THEY GOING TO THE SAME PLACE?

Imagine four doctors examining the same patient. One says:

> "You don't have an illness."

Another says:

> "You have an infection."

Another says:

> "You have cancer."

And another says:

> "Your problem isn't physical at all."

It would sound strange to respond:

> "They're basically all saying the same thing."

They're not. They may all be sincere. They may all care deeply about the patient. They may even agree about certain symptoms. But their diagnoses are different. And because the diagnoses are different, their treatments are different. Religion works similarly. Most religions recognize that something about human existence isn't as it should be. But they don't necessarily agree about what the problem is or what the solution is. And Christianity's diagnosis is particularly interesting.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH US?

Many spiritual approaches focus primarily on what human beings must do. Gain wisdom. Follow a path. Obey certain commands. Perform religious practices. Become enlightened. Live morally. Balance our actions. Improve ourselves. Christianity certainly teaches that how we live matters. But Christianity begins somewhere else. It says our deepest problem can't be solved simply by becoming more religious or trying harder. Our problem is separation from God caused by sin. Paul writes:

> "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:23

That's why Christianity isn't primarily a self-improvement program. If our problem were merely ignorance, we'd need education. If our problem were merely bad habits, we'd need discipline. If our problem were merely lack of religion, we'd need religious practices.

But if our deepest problem is separation from the God who gives us life…

we need reconciliation. And that's where Jesus becomes central.

THE MOUNTAIN ILLUSTRATION

You've probably heard the illustration. God is at the top of a mountain. Humanity is at the bottom. Different religions are simply different paths up the mountain. One person takes Christianity. Another Islam. Another Buddhism. Another Hinduism. Another spirituality. Different roads. Same destination. It's an attractive picture. But Christianity makes a radically different claim. Christianity isn't primarily the story of humanity climbing the mountain to reach God. It's the story of God coming down the mountain to reach us. John describes Jesus this way:

> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John 1:14

We don't climb our way to God. God comes to us. That's one of the great differences at the heart of Christianity.

RELIGION SAYS "DO."

At the risk of oversimplifying the differences among religions, there is a helpful distinction at the center of Christianity. Religion can easily become: Do. Do enough. Learn enough. Obey enough. Improve enough. Sacrifice enough. Become good enough. Christianity announces something very different: Done. Jesus has done for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. Paul writes:

> "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works."

Ephesians 2:8–9

Christianity doesn't say:

> "Become good enough and maybe God will accept you."

It says:

> "God has come looking for you."

That's grace.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

One of Jesus' most famous stories is about a lost son. A young man takes his inheritance, leaves his father, and wastes everything. Eventually his life falls apart. He decides to go home. But he doesn't expect to be welcomed back as a son. He plans a speech. He'll

confess what he's done and ask to become a servant. In other words: Maybe I can work my way back. But Jesus says that while the son is still far away, his father sees him. And then something extraordinary happens.

> "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son."

Luke 15:20

The father runs. The son has a speech. The father has an embrace. The son expects servanthood. The father restores sonship. The son comes home prepared to earn. The father responds with grace. That's the heart of the Christian story.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Luke 15:11–24 together. Pay attention to both the son and the father. Then talk about it:

What does the son believe he needs to do to come home?

What does the father's response reveal about him?

What do you think Jesus is trying to communicate about God?

Why do you think grace can be difficult for people to accept?

Is it easier for you to imagine earning God's approval or receiving it as a gift?

LOOK AT JESUS

Now we're ready to return to Jesus' controversial statement:

> "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6

Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say:

> "My religion is the way."

He says:

> "I am."

That's important. Christianity isn't ultimately centered around a religious system. It's centered around a person. Jesus isn't merely telling us which path to take to find God. He claims to be the way God has come to find us. That's why Christians talk so much about Jesus. Not because Christians are better than everyone else. Not because Western culture

is superior. Jesus wasn't Western. He was a first-century Jewish man from the Middle East. The Christian claim isn't:

"We're better."

It's:

"We need rescue too."

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EXCLUSIVE AND UNINVITING

There is an important distinction here. Something can be exclusive in its claim while being open in its invitation. Imagine a doctor discovers the cure for a deadly disease. There may be one cure. But the doctor offers it freely to everyone. Would we call the doctor hateful for saying:

"This is the treatment that will save you"?

No. The real question would be:

Does the treatment work?

Christianity makes an exclusive truth claim. Jesus is the way to reconciliation with God. But look at the invitation. Jesus says:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened."

Matthew 11:28

All. Rich and poor. Religious and irreligious. Men and women. Moral and immoral. Every nation. Every ethnicity. Every background. Every social class. Every kind of past. The way is exclusive. The invitation is radically inclusive. Everyone is invited.

WRESTLE WITH IT

BUT ISN'T IT ARROGANT TO SAY YOUR RELIGION IS TRUE?

It certainly can be expressed arrogantly. Christians have sometimes done exactly that. But believing something is true isn't automatically arrogant. Every worldview makes truth claims. The statement:

"Jesus is the only way to God"

is a truth claim. But so is:

"All religions lead to God."

And so is:

"There is no God."

Each statement describes reality in a particular way. The real question isn't:

"Which belief sounds least offensive?"

It's:

"Which belief is true?"

And Christians should pursue that question with humility. Because Christianity gives Christians absolutely no reason to boast. If salvation is a gift, then Christians aren't people who successfully climbed the mountain. We're people who needed to be rescued. Grace should make us humble.

BUT WHAT ABOUT SINCERE PEOPLE IN OTHER RELIGIONS?

Sincerity matters. But sincerity alone can't determine truth. Someone can sincerely believe something and still be mistaken. You've probably experienced that yourself. You were convinced you remembered something correctly. You were wrong. You confidently took the wrong road. You believed something someone told you that turned out not to be true. The question isn't whether someone is sincere. The question is whether what they believe corresponds to reality. That applies to Christians too. A Christian can sincerely believe something false. That's why we keep coming back to the evidence.

Who is Jesus?

Can we trust the accounts about Him?

And eventually:

Did He really rise from the dead?

Because if Jesus actually rose from the dead, His claims deserve extraordinary attention.

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD ABOUT JESUS?

This is one of the hardest questions Christians wrestle with. The Bible clearly teaches two things Christians should hold together. First, God is perfectly just. Abraham asks:

"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Genesis 18:25

The biblical answer is yes. God will never judge someone unjustly. Second, the Bible teaches that salvation comes through Jesus. Christians differ over exactly how God applies Christ's saving work to those who have had little or no opportunity to hear the gospel clearly. But Christianity invites us to trust something about God's character: God knows every person's heart, every circumstance, every opportunity, and every response

perfectly. We don't. So we can leave ultimate judgment in the hands of a God who is both perfectly just and perfectly loving.

And rather than using the question of someone who has never heard to avoid our own response, perhaps we should ask:

What will I do with what I have heard?

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to the dinner table.

> "Aren't all religions basically different roads up the same mountain?"

Maybe you still think they are. Maybe this conversation changed the way you see the question. Maybe Christianity's claim still feels uncomfortable. That's okay. Talk honestly:

What do you find appealing about the idea that all religions lead to God?

What differences between religions do you think actually matter?

Does the distinction between climbing to God and God coming to us change how you understand Christianity?

What do you think about salvation being a gift rather than something earned?

Does Jesus' exclusive claim bother you? Why?

What questions about other religions are you still wrestling with?

And then make it personal: If Jesus really is the way God has come to rescue us, would you want to receive what He's offering?

TRY THIS

This week, pay attention to how often you try to earn your worth. Maybe through achievement. Being liked. Being successful. Being moral. Being religious. Being productive. Being needed. Being a good parent. Being better than someone else. Whenever you notice it, stop for a moment. Remember one word: Grace. Then read Luke 15:11–32 again. This time, don't just ask which character you understand. Ask:

> "What does this story show me about God?"

And continue our prayer:

> "God, if You're real, help me recognize You."
>
> "If You want to be known, show me what You're like."
>
> "Jesus, help me see You for who You really are."

"God, if You have spoken through these words, help me hear You."

And now add:

"If Your grace really is a gift, help me understand why I need it."

Because that leads us to the center of the Christian story.

If God loves us…

If God wants to forgive us…

If salvation is a gift…

why did Jesus have to die?

And Christianity makes an even more astonishing claim. He didn't stay dead.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 07

What Did Jesus Do?

Why did Jesus die, and did He really rise from the dead?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Marcus had worn a cross around his neck for years. It had belonged to his grandfather, and he liked what it represented—faith, family, and something bigger than himself. But one day a friend asked him a question he couldn't answer: "Why did Jesus actually have to die?" Marcus knew the church answer: "Jesus died for our sins." He just wasn't sure what that meant. Why would someone's death two thousand years ago have anything to do with him?

Then his friend asked an even bigger question: "And do you really believe He came back from the dead?" Marcus paused. He had always thought of the resurrection as part of the Easter story. But he had never considered the alternative. What if it didn't happen? Suddenly he realized Christianity wasn't merely asking him to believe certain spiritual ideas. It was making an enormous claim: something happened in history that changed everything.

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

We've arrived at the center of Christianity. Not church. Not morality. Not religious rules. Not even Jesus' teaching. A cross and an empty tomb. Christians believe Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, and rose bodily from the dead. That's an extraordinary claim. And the earliest Christians knew it. Paul wrote:

> "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile."

1 Corinthians 15:17

That's remarkable. Paul doesn't say:

> "Even if the resurrection didn't happen, Christianity still contains some wonderful principles."

He says if Jesus didn't rise, Christianity collapses. Which means Christianity is vulnerable to investigation. Either something happened—or it didn't. Before we examine the resurrection, though, we need to understand why Jesus died in the first place.

TALK ABOUT IT

When you see a cross, what does it mean to you?

What have you heard Christians mean when they say, "Jesus died for my sins"?

Why do you think forgiveness would require the cross?

Do you believe miracles are possible?

What would you need to believe before accepting that someone actually rose from the dead?

If the resurrection really happened, what do you think it would mean?

THE PROBLEM BEHIND THE CROSS

In our last conversation, we talked about grace. God's forgiveness cannot be earned. But that creates an important question.

Why can't God simply forgive everyone?

Why the cross?

Imagine someone destroys your reputation, steals everything you have, and devastates your family. Later they say:

> "Sorry."

What would forgiveness cost?

If you choose to forgive, the damage doesn't magically disappear. Someone absorbs the cost. You could demand that the person repay everything. Or you could choose to release the debt. But if you release it, you absorb something they owe. Forgiveness is free to the person receiving it. It is never completely free to the person giving it. That helps us begin to understand the cross.

WHAT IS SIN?

We often think of sin as a list of religious mistakes. Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't cheat. Don't do bad things. But the Bible describes something deeper. Sin is our attempt to live independently from the God who created us. It's saying:

> "My life belongs to me."
>
> "I decide what is good."
>
> "I will be my own authority."

The individual behaviors we call sins flow from something deeper: A relationship with God has been fractured. And because God is the source of life, separation from God ultimately leads to death. Paul writes:

> "The wages of sin is death."

Romans 6:23

Sin creates a debt we cannot simply erase by becoming nicer people. We don't merely need improvement. We need reconciliation.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah described someone who would suffer on behalf of others:

> "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities."

Isaiah 53:5

Jesus later described His own mission this way:

> "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:45

A ransom is a price paid to secure someone's freedom. Jesus understood His death as accomplishing something for us that we couldn't accomplish for ourselves. On the cross, Jesus willingly takes upon Himself the consequence of human sin. Paul puts it this way:

> "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

2 Corinthians 5:21

This is the great exchange at the heart of Christianity. Our sin for His righteousness. Our guilt for His forgiveness. Our separation for His reconciliation. Our death for His life.

THE CROSS SHOWS US TWO THINGS

Look carefully at the cross and you'll see two realities at the same time.

SIN IS MORE SERIOUS THAN WE THINK.

If humanity's problem could have been solved by giving us better advice, Jesus could have simply taught us. If we only needed inspiration, He could have inspired us. If we

simply needed another set of moral rules, He could have given them. The cross says our problem goes deeper. We needed rescue. But the cross tells us something else.

YOU ARE MORE LOVED THAN YOU THINK.

Jesus willingly goes to the cross for people who don't deserve it. Paul writes:

> "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Romans 5:8

Not after we fixed ourselves. Not after we became religious. Not after we cleaned up our lives. While we were still sinners. The cross simultaneously tells us: Our sin is serious. And: God's love is greater.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Luke 23:32–49. Don't rush through it. Imagine yourself standing near the cross. Then talk about it: What stands out to you about the way Jesus responds to the people around Him?

What does Jesus say about those crucifying Him?

What do you think His death reveals about God?

How does the cross change the way you think about forgiveness?

What questions does Jesus' death raise for you?

Then read Isaiah 53:4–6. Ask:

What does this passage say the suffering servant is carrying for others?

JESUS' FINAL WORDS

John tells us that near the end of His crucifixion, Jesus said:

> "It is finished."

John 19:30

Those three words are central to Christianity. Not:

> "I am finished."

But:

> "It is finished."

Something had been accomplished. The debt was paid. The sacrifice was complete. The way back to God had been opened.

Remember the distinction from our last conversation?

Religion can easily become: Do. The cross announces: Done. But if the story ended with Jesus' death, Christianity would simply be the story of another religious leader killed by an empire. Something else happened.

THE EMPTY TOMB

On the Sunday morning following Jesus' crucifixion, several women went to His tomb. They expected to find a body. Instead, they found the tomb empty. And soon Jesus' followers began making an extraordinary claim: We have seen Him alive. Not:

> "His teachings live on."

Not:

> "We felt His presence spiritually."

They claimed Jesus had physically risen from the dead. That's why the resurrection matters so much. Christianity doesn't rest primarily upon an idea. It rests upon an event.

THINK ABOUT IT

If someone told you today that a person had risen from the dead, skepticism would be appropriate. Dead people stay dead. The earliest Christians knew that too. That's precisely why the resurrection claim was so extraordinary.

So what are some of the things we need to explain?

CLUE #1: JESUS REALLY DIED

Jesus' crucifixion isn't a minor detail in the story. Roman crucifixion was designed to kill. Jesus was publicly executed under Pontius Pilate. His death was witnessed. His body was buried. The resurrection claim wasn't:

> "Jesus almost died and recovered."

It was:

> "Jesus was dead and is alive again."

CLUE #2: THE TOMB WAS REPORTED EMPTY

The Gospel accounts describe women discovering the empty tomb. That's an interesting detail. In that culture, women generally did not hold the same public legal standing as men. If someone were inventing a story simply to make it sound convincing to the surrounding culture, choosing women as the first witnesses would be an unusual strategy. Yet the Gospel writers preserve the story that way.

Why?

The simplest explanation may be: That's what the witnesses remembered happening.

CLUE #3: PEOPLE CLAIMED TO SEE JESUS ALIVE

Paul preserves an early summary of Christian belief:

> "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day…and that he appeared."

1 Corinthians 15:3–5

Paul then lists individuals and groups who claimed to have encountered the risen Jesus. At one point, he says Jesus appeared to more than five hundred people. These weren't merely stories written centuries later. The resurrection was at the center of Christian preaching from the beginning.

CLUE #4: THE DISCIPLES CHANGED

Before the crucifixion, Jesus' followers were terrified. Peter denied even knowing Him. The disciples scattered. Afterward, something changed. These same people began publicly announcing: Jesus is alive. They did this in the very places where Jesus had been condemned and crucified. They faced opposition, imprisonment, persecution, and in some cases death. Now, people can die for beliefs that are false. Sincerity doesn't prove truth. But there's an important distinction. People may die for something false they believe to be true.

The earliest disciples were in a position to know whether their central claim—that they had encountered the risen Jesus—was something they themselves had fabricated. Their willingness to suffer doesn't prove the resurrection. But it does make the idea that they knowingly invented the entire story harder to explain.

CLUE #5: SKEPTICS BECAME BELIEVERS

Two people are particularly interesting. James, Jesus' brother. And Paul, an enemy of the early Christian movement. The Gospels indicate Jesus' brothers were initially skeptical of Him. Yet James later became a leader in the Christian church. Paul went even further. He actively persecuted Christians. Then something happened. Paul claimed he encountered the risen Jesus. The persecutor became a preacher. The man trying to destroy Christianity became one of its most influential messengers.

What changed them?

Their answer was simple: They encountered the risen Jesus.

WRESTLE WITH IT

COULDN'T THE DISCIPLES HAVE MADE IT UP?

It's possible to propose that. But then we need to explain several things.

Why proclaim a resurrection in the place where Jesus had just been publicly executed?

Why include potentially embarrassing details in the accounts?

Why did frightened disciples suddenly become public witnesses?

Why did skeptics like James change?

Why did an opponent like Paul become a follower?

And why did resurrection become the center of the Christian message immediately rather than slowly developing centuries later? No historical argument can force someone to believe a miracle occurred. But dismissing the resurrection also requires an explanation of the evidence. The question becomes:

What explanation best accounts for what happened?

BUT MIRACLES DON'T HAPPEN

That objection makes sense if we've already decided there is no God. If the universe is a closed system with nothing beyond nature, resurrection is impossible. Dead people don't naturally rise. Christianity agrees. That's why resurrection would be a miracle. But think back to our second conversation. If there is a God who created the universe and gave life in the first place, then the question changes. Not:

> "Can dead people naturally rise?"

They can't. But:

"Could the God who created life raise someone from the dead?"

If God exists, resurrection isn't logically impossible. So the real question returns to the evidence.

Did He?

LOOK AT JESUS

One of my favorite resurrection encounters involves a man named Thomas. Thomas wasn't present when the other disciples claimed to have seen Jesus. And Thomas refused to believe them. He essentially said: Unless I see the evidence myself, I won't believe. Jesus later appears to him. What's fascinating is that Jesus doesn't shame Thomas for asking for evidence. He invites him closer.

"Put your finger here; see my hands."

John 20:27

Look at the scars. Examine the evidence. Then Thomas responds:

"My Lord and my God!"

John 20:28

Thomas moves from skepticism to worship. Christianity isn't asking you to pretend you don't have questions. Jesus can handle your questions. The invitation is simply: Come and see.

WHY THE RESURRECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING

If Jesus rose from the dead, then several things follow. Jesus is who He claimed to be. Death isn't the end. Sin can be forgiven. God has entered human history. Evil doesn't get the final word. There is hope beyond the grave. And perhaps most personally: Jesus is alive. Christianity isn't primarily about following the teachings of a dead religious leader. It's about knowing a living person.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Marcus. He had worn a cross for years. But now the cross meant something different. And so did the empty tomb. Maybe you've heard the story hundreds of times. Or maybe this is the first time you've really considered what Christianity is claiming. Talk honestly:

What part of the cross makes the most sense to you?

What part is hardest to understand?

How does the idea that forgiveness costs something change how you think about Jesus' death?

Which piece of the resurrection case do you find most interesting?

What alternative explanation for the resurrection do you find strongest?

What would it mean for your life if Jesus really rose from the dead?

And then consider an even more personal question: If Jesus died for you and rose from the dead, what would keep you from trusting Him?

TRY THIS

This week, read John 18–21. Read slowly. You're reading the central claim of Christianity. As you read, imagine you don't already know the ending. Watch Peter fail. Watch Jesus suffer. Stand near the cross. Visit the empty tomb. Listen to Thomas doubt. Watch Jesus restore Peter. And ask:

> "What explanation best makes sense of what I'm reading?"

Then continue our prayer:

> "God, if You're real, help me recognize You."
>
> "If You want to be known, show me what You're like."
>
> "Jesus, help me see You for who You really are."
>
> "God, if You have spoken through these words, help me hear You."
>
> "If Your grace really is a gift, help me understand why I need it."

And now add:

> "Jesus, if You really died and rose again, help me understand what that means for me."

Because eventually, every investigation reaches a moment when the question changes. We've asked:

Is there more?

Is there a God?

Who is Jesus?

Can I trust the Bible?

Why is the world broken?

Why Jesus?

What did Jesus do?

Eventually the question becomes:

What am I going to do with Jesus?

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 08

What Now?

What does it actually mean to believe in and follow Jesus?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Jordan had reached an uncomfortable place. When he first started these conversations, he was mostly curious. He had questions about God, doubts about the Bible, and plenty of reasons for keeping Christianity at a distance. But somewhere along the way, the questions had changed. He wasn't convinced he had every answer, but Jesus was becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss. What if this really was true?

Sitting across from his friend one morning, Jordan finally asked, "So what happens now? Do I start going to church? Try to be a better person? Pray some kind of prayer?" His friend smiled and said, "Those might become part of your journey. But Jesus' invitation was much simpler—and much bigger. He looked at ordinary people and said two words: Follow Me."

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Eventually Christianity becomes personal. You can investigate the evidence. Study the Bible. Admire Jesus. Agree that His teachings are good. Even believe intellectually that He died and rose again. But Jesus didn't simply invite people to agree with Him. He invited them to follow Him. That's an important distinction. Christianity isn't primarily: Accept these ideas. Follow these rules. Attend these meetings. Become a more religious person. It's an invitation into a relationship and a whole new way of life. Jesus says:

> "Come, follow me."

Matthew 4:19

That invitation was personal then. It still is. So the question is no longer only:

> "Do I believe Christianity is true?"

It becomes:

> "Am I willing to trust Jesus with my life?"

TALK ABOUT IT

Before we explain what following Jesus means, talk honestly.

When you hear the phrase "become a Christian," what comes to mind?

What do you think makes someone a Christian?

What's the difference between believing something about Jesus and actually trusting Him?

What do you think you might have to give up to follow Jesus?

What do you hope you might gain?

Is there anything keeping you from following Jesus right now?

There isn't a right answer you need to manufacture. This is a conversation.

THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine you're standing at the edge of a frozen lake. Someone tells you:

> "The ice will hold you."

You might agree. You've examined the ice. You've watched other people walk across it. You've researched its thickness. You could even say:

> "I believe the ice can hold a person."

But there's a difference between believing something about the ice and actually stepping onto it. Trust requires putting your weight on what you believe. Christian faith works similarly. It's possible to believe certain things about Jesus without actually trusting Jesus. The Bible even says:

> "Even the demons believe that—and shudder."

James 2:19

So biblical faith is more than agreeing that God exists. It's entrusting yourself to Him. Following Jesus means putting the weight of your life on who He is and what He has done.

JESUS' FIRST INVITATION

At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus announces:

> "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:15

Two words are especially important. Repent. Believe. They help us understand what it means to respond to Jesus.

REPENT

The word repent can sound harsh or religious. But its basic idea is a change of mind and direction. Imagine realizing you've been driving the wrong way. You don't solve the problem by driving faster. You turn around. Repentance means recognizing: I've been living life my way rather than God's way. It isn't simply feeling guilty. It's turning. From self-rule toward God's rule. From sin toward Jesus. From:

> "My life belongs to me."

to:

> "Jesus, my life belongs to You."

Repentance doesn't mean you've already fixed everything. You turn to Jesus precisely because you can't fix yourself.

BELIEVE

Jesus also says: Believe. Biblical belief isn't merely accepting a fact. It's trust. You're trusting that Jesus is who He claimed to be. You're trusting that His death is enough to forgive you. You're trusting that His resurrection means He is alive. You're trusting His grace rather than your goodness. Paul writes:

> "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Romans 10:9

Notice those words: Jesus is Lord. That's bigger than:

> "Jesus is helpful."

Or:

> "Jesus is inspiring."

Or even:

> "Jesus is my Savior."

Lord means King. Leader. Authority. Following Jesus means surrendering the throne of your life to Him.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

One of the clearest pictures of becoming a follower of Jesus appears in John 3. A religious leader named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus knows the Bible. He is moral. He is respected. He is religious. If anyone should be "good enough" for God, Nicodemus would seem like a strong candidate. But Jesus tells him:

> "You must be born again."

John 3:7

That's a surprising thing to tell a religious person. Jesus doesn't say:

> "Try harder."

He says:

> "You need new life."

Christianity isn't simply about becoming a better version of yourself. It's about becoming new.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read John 3:1–17. Pay attention to what Jesus says Nicodemus needs. Then talk about it: Why do you think Jesus tells a religious man that he needs to be born again?

What's the difference between improving your life and receiving a new life?

What does John 3:16 say motivated God?

What does God offer?

According to this passage, how is that gift received?

What questions does this raise for you?

GRACE CHANGES EVERYTHING

This is where everything we've talked about comes together. Paul writes:

> "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith."

Ephesians 2:8

Grace means you don't earn this. You receive it. You don't clean yourself up enough for Jesus. You come to Jesus because you can't clean yourself up enough. You don't bargain. You don't perform. You don't prove your worth. You don't become religious enough. You receive a gift. Think back to the lost son. He came home with a speech. The father met him with an embrace. That's grace.

DOES THAT MEAN HOW I LIVE DOESN'T MATTER?

No. Grace doesn't mean your life stays the same. It means the order changes. Religion can easily say: Change your life → God accepts you. The gospel says: God receives you by grace → and then He begins changing your life. Paul continues:

> "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."

Ephesians 2:10

Good works matter. But they aren't the cause of salvation. They're the result of salvation. We don't obey Jesus so He will love us. We learn to obey Jesus because He already does.

LOOK AT JESUS

One of the beautiful things about Jesus is the kind of people He invited to follow Him. They weren't spiritual superstars. Fishermen. Tax collectors. Political radicals. People with doubts. People with messy pasts. People who misunderstood Him. People who failed. Peter is a perfect example. Peter follows Jesus. Peter makes bold promises. Then when Jesus is arrested, Peter denies three times that he even knows Him. You might think Peter's story is over. But after the resurrection, Jesus goes looking for him. In John 21, Jesus restores Peter. Then He gives him essentially the same invitation again:

> "Follow me!"

John 21:19

Peter failed. Jesus wasn't finished with him. That's important because following Jesus doesn't mean you'll never struggle again. You'll still have questions. You'll still make mistakes. You'll still have moments of doubt. You'll still need grace. Following Jesus isn't a promise that you'll never fall. It's trusting that when you do, you know where to turn.

WHAT AM I ACTUALLY SAYING YES TO?

Following Jesus means saying yes to several things at once.

YES TO GRACE.

I cannot save myself. I receive what Jesus has done for me.

YES TO FORGIVENESS.

I bring my sin into the light and trust Christ to forgive me.

YES TO A NEW IDENTITY.

My past no longer gets the final word about who I am.

YES TO JESUS AS LORD.

I surrender the leadership of my life to Him.

YES TO A NEW WAY OF LIFE.

I begin learning to live like Jesus.

YES TO RELATIONSHIP.

Christianity isn't simply believing in God. It's knowing Him.

YES TO A MISSION.

Jesus doesn't only save us from something. He sends us toward something. Following Jesus isn't adding a religious activity to your existing life. It's receiving a new center for your life.

WRESTLE WITH IT

DO I HAVE TO HAVE ALL MY QUESTIONS ANSWERED FIRST?

No. Look at Jesus' first disciples. They followed Him before they understood everything about Him. They asked questions. They misunderstood. They doubted. They learned along the way. Faith isn't the absence of questions. It's deciding that you have enough reason to trust Jesus while continuing to pursue the questions you still have. Think about any meaningful relationship. You didn't know everything about someone before deciding to trust them. You knew enough to take another step. The same can be true with Jesus. You don't need all the answers to take your next step.

BUT WHAT IF I DON'T FEEL ANYTHING?

Some people describe dramatic experiences when they come to faith. Others don't. One person may feel overwhelming peace. Another may cry. Another may feel joy. Someone else may simply make a quiet decision:

> "Jesus, I'm trusting You."

Your faith isn't ultimately based on the intensity of your emotions. Feelings matter. But they change. The foundation of Christianity isn't:

> "I had a spiritual feeling."

It's:

> "Jesus died and rose again, and I'm placing my trust in Him."

WHAT WILL IT COST ME?

Jesus never hid the fact that following Him costs something. He said:

> "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

Following Jesus means surrender. There may be things He asks you to leave behind. Habits. Relationships. Priorities. Ambitions. Ways of thinking. Ways of living. Control. But notice something. Jesus doesn't ask you to surrender your life because He wants to take life from you. Remember what He said:

> "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

John 10:10

Jesus isn't inviting you away from life. He's inviting you into it.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Jordan's question:

> "So what happens now?"

Maybe that's your question too. Maybe you've become convinced that Jesus is who He claimed to be. Maybe you're not completely certain, but you know you want to trust Him. Maybe you're still wrestling. Wherever you are, be honest. Talk about it:

Where would you say you are with Jesus right now?

What do you believe about Him?

What's keeping you from trusting Him?

Is there something you're afraid Jesus might ask you to surrender?

What do you think it would mean for Jesus to become Lord of your life?

Are you ready to follow Him?

Don't rush the last question. But don't avoid it either. Because at some point Jesus' invitation becomes personal:

> "Follow Me."

IF YOU'RE READY

There aren't magic words that make someone a Christian. Prayer is simply a way of expressing to God what's happening in your heart. If you're ready to turn toward Jesus and trust Him, you could pray something like this: Jesus, I believe You are who You said You are. I believe You died for me and rose again. I know I have sinned and lived life on my own terms. I need Your grace and forgiveness. I turn from my way and put my trust in You. Forgive me. Make me new. I give You my life. Be my Savior and my Lord. Teach me to follow You. Amen. The prayer isn't what saves you. Jesus does.

The prayer simply expresses your trust in Him.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Following Jesus isn't the finish line. It's the starting line. Think about Jesus' invitation again: Follow Me. Following means movement. Learning. Growing. Trusting. Changing. Jesus invites you into a new way of life with Him. Start simply. Talk with Him. Prayer doesn't need to be complicated. Speak honestly with God. Listen to Him. Keep reading the Bible. Start with the Gospels and continue discovering Jesus. Walk with others. Following Jesus was never intended to be done alone. Find other followers of Jesus who can walk with you. Obey what you're learning. When Jesus shows you a new way to live, practice it.

Tell someone. Share with someone you trust that you've decided to follow Jesus. Keep asking questions. Following Jesus doesn't end curiosity. It gives your questions a new place to go.

TRY THIS

If you've decided to follow Jesus, tell the friend who has been walking through these conversations with you. Then take a simple step. Read Mark 1:14–20. Notice Jesus' invitation:

> "Follow Me."

Then each morning this week, begin with one simple prayer:

> "Jesus, today I choose to follow You. Show me how."

If you're not ready yet, that's okay. Don't fake a decision. Keep exploring. Keep reading. Keep asking questions. And pray honestly:

> "Jesus, if You are who You say You are, help me trust You."

Because following Jesus doesn't mean the questions disappear. In many ways, an entirely new set of questions begins.

How do I actually change?

How do I experience God?

How do I find peace when life is chaotic?

How do I overcome old patterns?

How do I learn to hear God's voice?

How do I become more like Jesus?

Those aren't merely questions about believing. They're questions about living. And that's where we're going next.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 09

Can I Really Live Differently?

How do I find the peace, joy, and life Jesus promises?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Rachel had been following Jesus for a few months, and in many ways, something really had changed. She was reading the Bible, attending church, and beginning to see God differently. But there was something she hadn't expected. She was still anxious. She still lost her temper. She still compared herself to other people. Old insecurities still showed up, and some of the habits she thought would disappear seemed determined to follow her into her new life.

One morning she finally admitted it to a friend. "I thought following Jesus was supposed to change me. So why do I still feel like me?" Her friend smiled. "Because Jesus didn't just invite you to make a decision. He invited you to become His disciple. You received a new life in a moment. Now you're learning how to live it."

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

This is where Christianity gets practical. Maybe you've decided to follow Jesus. Maybe you're still exploring. Either way, you've probably noticed something about human beings: Knowing what is right doesn't necessarily give us the power to do what is right. We know we should forgive. But we hold grudges. We know comparison steals our joy. But we compare anyway. We know anxiety can't control tomorrow. But we still worry. We know certain habits are hurting us. But we return to them. We want peace but live hurried. We want healthy relationships but hurt the people closest to us. We want to become different.

But change can be difficult.

So does following Jesus actually transform someone?

Christianity's answer is yes. But perhaps not in the way we expect. Jesus doesn't merely offer us a better set of rules. He offers us a new source of life.

TALK ABOUT IT

Before talking about transformation, be honest about where you are.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

What patterns in your life seem hardest to change?

Where do you experience the most anxiety or lack of peace?

What do you think produces genuine joy?

Have you ever tried to change something about yourself and eventually fallen back into the same pattern? What do you think it would look like to become the kind of person Jesus describes?

THINK ABOUT IT

Most of us have tried some version of self-improvement. New Year's resolutions. Fitness plans. Productivity systems. Self-help books. New routines. Better boundaries. Habit trackers. Some of those things can be incredibly helpful. But eventually we discover something: Behavior is easier to modify than the heart is to transform. You can control an angry response while still being angry inside. You can appear confident while still being consumed by insecurity. You can perform generosity while secretly craving recognition. You can change your surroundings without changing what's happening within you.

Jesus is interested in more than behavior modification. He wants transformation.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRYING AND TRAINING

Imagine deciding tomorrow that you want to run a marathon. You buy running shoes. You register for the race. You watch inspirational videos. You stand at the starting line and say:

> "I'm going to try really hard."

Determination matters. But determination alone won't prepare you to run twenty-six miles. You need training. Running. Rest. Nutrition. Consistency. Repeated practices over time begin changing your body. Following Jesus works similarly. There are moments when obedience requires determination. But Jesus didn't invite us merely to try harder at being like Him. He invites us to train with Him so we can become like Him. That's what a disciple is. A disciple is more than someone who believes in Jesus. A disciple is someone learning to live the way of Jesus.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Jesus gave His disciples a picture of how transformation happens. He used a grapevine. Jesus said:

> "I am the vine; you are the branches."

John 15:5

Think about a branch. A branch doesn't produce grapes by straining. It doesn't wake up saying:

> "I need to try harder to produce fruit today."

Fruit grows because the branch remains connected to the vine. Jesus continues:

> "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

John 15:5

Jesus gives us the secret to transformation: Stay connected to Me. The Christian life isn't primarily about working harder for Jesus. It's learning to live with Jesus.

ABIDE

Older Bible translations use a beautiful word for what Jesus describes: Abide. Remain. Stay. Make your home. Live connected. Abiding means learning to live every part of life in relationship with Jesus. Not just Sunday. Not just prayer time. Work. Marriage. Friendship. Money. Stress. Decisions. Conflict. Success. Failure. Ordinary Tuesday afternoons. Jesus doesn't want to become one more compartment in your life. He wants to become the source of your life.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read John 15:1–11. Pay attention to the words remain, fruit, love, and joy. Then talk about it:

What does Jesus compare Himself to?

What happens when a branch remains connected to the vine?

What do you think it means practically to "remain" in Jesus?

Why do you think Jesus connects obedience with love?

What does Jesus say about joy?

Where in your life do you feel most disconnected from Jesus?

YOU ARE NOT DOING THIS ALONE

Before Jesus left His disciples, He made them an extraordinary promise. He told them He would send the Holy Spirit. Jesus said:

> "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things."

John 14:26

Christianity isn't simply: Jesus showed us how to live. Now do your best to copy Him. Jesus gives His followers the Holy Spirit. God's presence with us and within us. The Spirit guides. Convicts. Comforts. Teaches. Strengthens. Transforms. This means the Christian life isn't merely imitation. It's empowerment. God doesn't only show you the life of Jesus. He gives you His Spirit to form the life of Jesus within you.

WHAT DOES CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

Paul describes the kind of life the Holy Spirit begins producing:

> "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Galatians 5:22–23

Notice the word again: Fruit. Jesus used it too. Fruit grows. Usually slowly. Often invisibly at first. But over time, something begins changing. You become more loving. More peaceful. More patient. More generous. More courageous. More forgiving. More self-controlled. Not perfectly. But increasingly. The goal of following Jesus isn't simply:

> "How much Bible do I know?"

Or:

> "How often do I attend church?"

The deeper question is:

> "Who am I becoming?"

PEACE ISN'T THE ABSENCE OF PROBLEMS

Jesus made another surprising promise to His disciples:

> "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you."

John 14:27

Notice the setting. Jesus says this shortly before His arrest and crucifixion. The disciples are about to experience chaos. So Jesus isn't promising a problem-free life. He's offering something deeper. Peace in the middle of problems. We often think: I'll have peace when the situation changes. When the relationship gets better. When the diagnosis changes. When I have enough money. When my children are okay. When work settles down. When I know what's going to happen. Jesus offers a peace that isn't completely dependent upon circumstances.

Because Christian peace isn't ultimately confidence that everything will happen the way we want. It's confidence that whatever happens, we aren't facing it alone.

WHAT ABOUT JOY?

Joy works similarly. Biblical joy isn't pretending everything is wonderful. It isn't forced positivity. And it doesn't mean Christians never feel sadness. Remember: Jesus wept. Joy is deeper than happiness. Happiness is often connected to what is happening around us. Joy can exist because of what is true within us and beyond us. We are loved. We are forgiven. God is present. Our lives have purpose. Death isn't the end. Our story is part of something bigger. That's why joy and grief can sometimes exist in the same person at the same time.

HOW DO I ACTUALLY GROW?

If transformation happens through relationship with Jesus, how do we cultivate that relationship? Christians throughout history have practiced simple rhythms that create space for life with God. Not to earn God's love. But to experience it and learn to live from it.

SCRIPTURE

We read the Bible not simply to collect information. We learn to recognize God's voice and understand His ways.

PRAYER

Prayer is more than asking God for things. It's conversation. Talking. Listening. Thanking. Confessing. Being honest.

WORSHIP

Worship redirects our attention. It reminds us that God is bigger than whatever is currently consuming us.

COMMUNITY

Jesus never intended discipleship to be practiced alone. We need people who encourage us, challenge us, forgive us, and help us grow.

OBEDIENCE

Transformation happens when truth moves from something we know to something we practice.

SERVICE

Jesus forms us as we learn to turn our attention away from ourselves and toward others. None of these practices make God love you more. They create space for you to become increasingly aware of and responsive to the God who already loves you.

LOOK AT JESUS

If you want to know what a life connected to the Father looks like, watch Jesus. Jesus regularly withdrew to pray. He knew Scripture. He worshiped. He rested. He ate meals with people. He served. He practiced compassion. He lived in community. He obeyed the Father. He gave His life away. Jesus' life had rhythms. There were moments of crowds and moments of solitude. Teaching and listening. Working and resting. Speaking and silence. Celebration and grief. Jesus didn't simply give His disciples information about God. He showed them a way of life with God. And then He invited them to practice that life with Him.

WRESTLE WITH IT

IF JESUS CHANGES PEOPLE, WHY DO CHRISTIANS STILL STRUGGLE?

Because transformation is a process. Becoming a Christian doesn't instantly remove every habit, wound, temptation, insecurity, or unhealthy pattern. The New Testament repeatedly speaks to Christians who are still learning how to live differently. They need correction. Encouragement. Forgiveness. Grace. Growth. The presence of struggle doesn't necessarily mean transformation isn't happening. Sometimes struggle is evidence that you've become aware of something you previously accepted. Before, you didn't care. Now you do. Before, you justified it. Now you're fighting it. Before, you hid.

Now you're bringing it into the light. Growth isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it's simply realizing:

> "I responded differently this time."

WHAT ABOUT WHEN I FAIL?

You will. Every follower of Jesus does. And when you fail, your instinct may be to hide from God. That's one of humanity's oldest instincts. But the gospel invites you to do the opposite. Run toward Him. John writes:

> "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins."

1 John 1:9

Confession isn't informing God about something He doesn't know. It's agreeing with Him about what's true.

> "God, that was wrong."
>
> "I need Your forgiveness."
>
> "Help me change."

Grace isn't permission to remain stuck. Grace is the safe place from which real change can begin.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE

One of the most dangerous ideas about Christianity is that faith is simply:

> "Me and Jesus."

Jesus called people into a community. The New Testament describes Christians as a family. A body. Brothers and sisters. People who carry one another's burdens. Encourage one another. Confess to one another. Serve one another. Forgive one another. Love one another. Following Jesus is personal. But it was never intended to be private. We need people around us who can say:

> "I'm following Jesus too. Let's walk together."

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Rachel's question:

> "Why do I still feel like me?"

Because transformation doesn't erase your personality. And it doesn't happen overnight. Jesus isn't trying to turn you into someone else. He's restoring you into the person you were created to become. Talk honestly:

Where do you most want Jesus to change you?

Which fruit of the Spirit do you most want to see grow in your life?

What currently steals your peace?

Which spiritual practice feels most natural to you?

Which one is hardest?

Who are the people helping you follow Jesus?

What would it look like for you to live connected to Jesus throughout an ordinary day? And perhaps ask yourself this: Am I trying harder to live for Jesus—or learning to live more deeply with Jesus? There is a difference.

TRY THIS

For the next seven days, practice a simple daily rhythm. Don't make it complicated. Set aside ten minutes.

BE STILL

Take one minute and simply become aware that God is present. Pray:

> "Jesus, I am here, and You are here."

READ

Slowly read a short section from John 15. Don't try to finish a certain amount. Notice one word or sentence that stands out.

TALK

Tell Jesus what's actually happening in your life. What you're grateful for. What you're worried about. Where you're struggling. Where you need help.

LISTEN

Sit quietly for a moment. Ask:

> "Jesus, what are You forming in me today?"

PRACTICE

Choose one thing you sense Jesus inviting you to live differently that day. Forgive someone. Encourage someone. Tell the truth. Slow down. Be generous. Apologize. Serve. Trust. Then go live it. The goal isn't to complete a religious routine. The goal is connection. Because branches don't produce fruit by trying harder. They produce fruit by staying connected to the vine. And over time, life with Jesus begins producing the life of Jesus within us. But there's one question none of us can avoid forever.

No matter how meaningful our lives become…

No matter how much we grow…

Eventually every human life ends.

Or does it?

That's our final conversation.

NEXT CONVERSATION

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 10

What Happens When I Die?

Is death really the end?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Chris stood near the back of the room at his friend's funeral, watching a slideshow of photographs move across the screen. Childhood. Graduation. Marriage. Vacations. Birthdays. Ordinary moments that suddenly seemed incredibly important. Just days earlier, his friend had been alive—laughing, talking, making plans. Now everyone was speaking about him in the past tense. Chris had been to funerals before, but this one felt different. They were the same age.

Driving home, he couldn't stop thinking about how quickly a human life can become a collection of memories. Eventually one question surfaced that he couldn't push away: Where is he now? Then came an even more personal one: What happens to me when I die? For the first time, death wasn't an abstract idea somewhere in the distant future. It was a reality. And if death wasn't the end, Chris realized, then almost everything about how he lived now mattered differently.

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Death may be the most certain and most avoided reality of human existence. We plan careers. Vacations. Retirement. Relationships. Financial futures. We schedule appointments months in advance. But there is one appointment none of us puts on the calendar. Eventually, every human life ends. Rich and poor. Famous and unknown. Religious and irreligious. Powerful and powerless. Death is the great equalizer. We can postpone it. Treat disease. Improve health. Extend life. But eventually we encounter the same question:

Is this all there is?

If death is the end, that changes how we understand life.

But if death isn't the end…

that changes everything.

TALK ABOUT IT

This may be one of the most personal conversations in the booklet. Don't rush.

What do you believe happens when someone dies?

Where did that belief come from?

Have you ever experienced the death of someone close to you?

Did that experience change the way you think about life?

Are you afraid of death? Why or why not?

Do you believe there is something beyond this life?

If you knew with certainty that there was life after death, how would it change the way you live now?

THINK ABOUT IT

Human beings have always wrestled with death. Across cultures and throughout history, people have buried their dead, performed rituals, built memorials, told stories, and asked whether some part of us continues beyond physical death. There's something interesting about grief. When someone we love dies, we don't simply experience their death as biologically unfortunate. It feels wrong. We say things like:

> "They should still be here."

Even when someone has lived a long life, death feels like an interruption.

Why?

Perhaps it's because, as Ecclesiastes said earlier:

> "He has also set eternity in the human heart."

Ecclesiastes 3:11

We began our journey with that verse. Maybe the longing for more we discussed in our first conversation and our resistance to death are connected. We seem to be creatures who long for a life that doesn't end.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible doesn't describe death as something good. It calls death an enemy. Paul writes:

> "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

1 Corinthians 15:26

That's important. Christianity doesn't tell grieving people:

> "Death is natural, so don't be sad."

Jesus Himself wept at a grave. Death represents something that has gone wrong in God's creation.

Remember our earlier conversation about brokenness?

Sin brought separation. Brokenness. And ultimately death. But Christianity makes an extraordinary claim: Jesus entered death in order to defeat it. The cross wasn't the end. The tomb wasn't the end. Jesus rose. And because He rose, Christianity says death no longer gets the final word.

JESUS AT A GRAVE

Remember Lazarus?

Jesus arrives after His friend has died. Lazarus' sister Martha is grieving. Jesus says something astonishing to her:

> "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die."

John 11:25

Notice again how Jesus speaks. He doesn't simply say:

> "I know how to get to eternal life."

He says:

> "I am the resurrection and the life."

Then He asks Martha:

> "Do you believe this?"

John 11:26

That's the question at the center of Christian hope. Not merely:

> "Do you believe in an afterlife?"

But:

> "Do you trust the One who claims authority over death?"

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER DEATH?

The Bible teaches that physical death isn't the end of human existence. We continue beyond death. And ultimately, God will raise the dead. This is important because Christian hope isn't merely:

> "My soul goes somewhere when I die."

The ultimate Christian hope is resurrection. Paul writes:

> "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

1 Corinthians 15:20

The word firstfruits points to the beginning of a harvest. Jesus' resurrection isn't presented as a one-time exception. It's the beginning of something. What happened to Jesus is a preview of what God intends to do for those who belong to Him.

HEAVEN ISN'T THE END OF THE STORY

When people think about Christianity and the afterlife, they often imagine floating on clouds somewhere forever. That's not the Bible's ultimate picture. The biblical story began with creation. And it ends with new creation. John writes:

> "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth.'"

Revelation 21:1

Then:

> "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them."

Revelation 21:3

God doesn't abandon creation. He restores it.

Remember the story we've been tracing?

Creation. Brokenness. Rescue. Restoration. The Bible ends where the story has been heading all along: God with His people.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Revelation 21:1–5. Read it slowly. Notice what is there. And what is gone. Then talk about it:

What does this passage say God will ultimately do?

What things are no longer present?

What do you think it means for God to "make everything new"?

How is this picture different from the way you've imagined heaven?

Which part of this promise gives you the most hope?

If this future is real, how should it change the way we live now?

WHAT ABOUT JUDGMENT?

This is where the conversation becomes more difficult. The Bible doesn't merely say we continue after death. It says our lives matter eternally. Hebrews says:

> "People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."

Hebrews 9:27

The idea of judgment can make us uncomfortable. But think back to our conversation about evil. We said we want justice. We want trafficking confronted. Abuse exposed. Murder judged. Oppression stopped. We don't actually want a universe where evil ultimately doesn't matter. A God who never judges evil wouldn't ultimately be good. So Christianity promises something our hearts often demand: One day, everything will be made right. No injustice will remain hidden forever. No evil will ultimately win. But there's a problem.

If God perfectly judges evil...

none of us stands before Him claiming complete innocence. That's why the final judgment brings us back to Jesus.

GRACE—ONE MORE TIME

If Christianity taught that eternal life depended upon being good enough, none of us could have confidence.

How good is good enough?

How many failures are too many?

Can good deeds cancel bad ones?

That's not the gospel. The gospel says our hope isn't in our record. It's in Jesus. Paul writes:

> "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6:23

Notice the contrast. Wages are earned. A gift is received. Eternal life isn't God's paycheck for good people. It's God's gift to people who trust Jesus.

WRESTLE WITH IT

WHAT ABOUT HELL?

We shouldn't avoid this question. Jesus spoke about judgment seriously. Christianity teaches that our choices matter and that separation from God is ultimately real. But sometimes hell has been presented as though God enjoys condemning people. That's not the picture Scripture gives us. The Bible says:

> "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son."

John 3:16

God moves toward humanity. God offers forgiveness. God absorbs the cost of reconciliation. God invites people home. God desires repentance. The cross reveals just how far God is willing to go to rescue us. So judgment shouldn't make Christians arrogant. It should make us humble. We aren't people who rescued ourselves. We are people who were offered grace.

DOES A LOVING GOD REALLY JUDGE PEOPLE?

Love and judgment aren't necessarily opposites. Imagine someone you love is being abused. Would love simply shrug and say:

> "Who am I to judge?"

No. Love confronts what destroys the beloved. A God who loves perfectly must ultimately oppose what destroys His creation. That's why the Bible can describe God as both loving and just. The same Jesus who warns about judgment is the Jesus who goes to the cross. God's justice and God's love meet at Jesus.

LOOK AT JESUS

Near the end of His life, Jesus was crucified between two criminals. One of them turned toward Jesus and said:

> "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Luke 23:42

Think about that man's situation. He had no time left to fix his life. No opportunity to build a better religious record. No years of good works ahead of him. Nothing to offer Jesus. Only trust. Jesus responds:

> "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:43

That is grace in its simplest form. The man's hope wasn't:

"Look what I've done."

It was:

"Jesus, remember me."

And Jesus did.

WHAT CHRISTIAN HOPE REALLY IS

Christian hope isn't wishful thinking. It isn't:

"I hope everything somehow works out."

Christian hope has a name. Jesus. Because Jesus rose, Christians believe death has been defeated. Because Jesus lives, eternal life is possible. Because Jesus forgives, judgment doesn't have to mean condemnation. Because Jesus is returning, evil doesn't get the final word. Because God is restoring creation, suffering isn't forever. That's why Christians can grieve deeply without grieving hopelessly. Death is real. But death isn't final.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Come back to Chris driving home from the funeral. His question wasn't merely:

"Where is my friend?"

Eventually it became:

"What about me?"

That's where this conversation eventually takes all of us. One day, someone else will tell stories about our lives. Someone else will look through our photographs. Someone else will possess the things we spent our lives accumulating. So ask yourself:

What do you currently believe happens when you die?

What part of the Christian hope is most compelling to you?

What part is hardest to believe?

Does the idea of judgment frighten, bother, or comfort you? Why?

How would belief in resurrection change the way you approach suffering?

If death isn't the end, what becomes more important about the way you're living now?

Are you at peace with God?

Don't rush past that last question.

Are you at peace with God?

TRY THIS

Take twenty quiet minutes sometime this week. No phone. No music. No distractions. Think about your life. Not morbidly. Honestly. Ask yourself:

If I knew my life was shorter than I imagined, what would matter most?

Who would I love differently?

Who would I forgive?

What would I stop chasing?

What would I start doing?

What would I regret leaving undone?

And then ask the most important question:

Where am I with Jesus?

Then pray:

> "Jesus, I believe You are the resurrection and the life."
>
> "Thank You that death doesn't have to be the end."
>
> "Help me live today in light of eternity."

And if you're still unsure what you believe, pray honestly:

> "Jesus, if You really defeated death, help me trust You with my life—and my death."

WHERE WE STARTED

Think back to our very first conversation. We asked:

IS THERE MORE?

We wondered whether there could be more to life than what we can see, accumulate, accomplish, and experience. We've traveled through some enormous questions since then.

Is there a God?

Who is Jesus?

Can I trust the Bible?

Why is the world so broken?

Why Jesus?

What did Jesus do?

What now?

Can I really live differently?

And now:

What happens when I die?

Christianity's answer brings us right back to where we began. Yes. There is more. More than what you can see. More than what you can own. More than what you can achieve. More than your successes. More than your failures. More than your past. More than this life. And the "more" Christianity offers isn't ultimately a philosophy. It isn't a religion. It isn't a set of rules. It's a Person. Jesus said:

> "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

John 10:10

And He said:

> "I am the resurrection and the life."

John 11:25

The invitation that began our search is the same invitation that ends it: Come and see. Come and know. Come and follow. Because the answer to the question "Is there more?" is ultimately: Yes. There is more life to discover. More grace to receive. More purpose to live. More of God to know. And because of Jesus— even death isn't the end.

THE CONVERSATION ISN'T OVER

Maybe you've decided to follow Jesus. Maybe you're close. Maybe you still have questions. That's okay. This booklet was never intended to answer every question you could ask. It was designed to start a conversation. So keep asking. Keep exploring. Keep opening the Bible. Keep talking with people you trust. Keep looking at Jesus. And perhaps most importantly: Keep pursuing. Because sometimes the greatest discoveries begin with the courage to ask a simple question:

What if there really is more?

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 11

What Is The Trinity?

Is God one—or is God three?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Maya had been having conversations about Christianity with a friend for several weeks. Some things were beginning to make sense. She understood why Christians believed in God. Jesus had become increasingly compelling. She was even beginning to understand why Christians believed Jesus was more than simply a teacher or prophet. But then she ran into a problem.

"Wait," she said. "Christians believe in one God, right?"

Her friend nodded.

"But you believe the Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God?"

Another nod. Maya laughed.

"Then that's three Gods. You can't say one plus one plus one equals one."

It seemed like Christianity was contradicting itself.

Is God one?

Is God three?

And what in the world do Christians mean when they talk about the Trinity?

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Let's start by acknowledging something. The Trinity is difficult to understand. Christians have been thinking, writing, debating, and sometimes arguing about it for nearly two thousand years. And there's a reason. We're attempting to describe the nature of God. If God created space, time, matter, energy, and the human mind itself, it shouldn't surprise us that there are things about His existence that stretch the limits of our understanding. But difficult doesn't mean contradictory. And mystery doesn't mean nonsense. The Christian claim isn't: God is one God and three Gods. That would be a contradiction.

Christianity claims: There is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One Being. Three Persons. That's the Trinity.

TALK ABOUT IT

Before going further:

What have you heard about the Trinity?

Does the idea of God being three-in-one seem contradictory to you?

When you picture God, do you primarily imagine the Father, Jesus, or something else?

Who do you think Jesus believed Himself to be?

What do you think the Holy Spirit is—a person, a force, God's power, something else? Would you expect an infinite God to be completely understandable to a finite human mind?

START WITH SOMETHING IMPORTANT

The word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible. That surprises some people. But neither do many words we use to summarize biblical ideas. Trinity comes from a word meaning three-in-one. Christians developed the term because they were trying to make sense of several things the Bible teaches simultaneously. They didn't begin with:

> "Let's invent a really complicated doctrine."

They began with what they encountered in Scripture. And three claims kept appearing.

THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD.

THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT ARE EACH DESCRIBED AS DIVINE.

THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT ARE DISTINCT FROM ONE ANOTHER.

The Trinity is Christianity's attempt to take all three claims seriously at the same time.

ONE GOD

Let's begin where Judaism and Christianity begin. There is one God. The Old Testament declares:

> "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

Deuteronomy 6:4

This was central to Israel's faith. They lived among cultures that worshiped many gods. God of the sea. God of fertility. God of war. God of harvest. Israel's declaration was

radically different: There aren't many gods. There is one God. The New Testament never abandons that conviction. Paul writes:

> "There is but one God."

1 Corinthians 8:6

Christianity isn't the belief in three gods. Christians are monotheists.

So where does the "three" come from?

THEN JESUS SHOWS UP

This is where things get interesting. Jesus doesn't simply speak about God. He speaks and acts with God's authority. He forgives sins. Receives worship. Claims unique unity with the Father. Says He existed before Abraham. And tells His disciples:

> "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9

John begins his Gospel with an even more remarkable statement:

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

John 1:1

Notice the tension. The Word was with God. Distinction. And the Word was God. Divinity. Then John tells us:

> "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John 1:14

John is talking about Jesus.

Somehow Jesus is distinct from the Father…

and yet shares in the identity of God.

AND THEN THERE'S THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Bible doesn't describe the Holy Spirit merely as an impersonal energy. The Spirit speaks. Teaches. Guides. Can be grieved. Makes decisions. And is identified with God. In Acts 5, Peter confronts Ananias for lying. He says:

> "You have lied to the Holy Spirit."

Acts 5:3

Then immediately:

"You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

Acts 5:4

So now we have: The Father is God. Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit is God. But Scripture continues to insist: There is one God. That's the puzzle early Christians were trying to understand.

ONE WHAT. THREE WHOS.

Here's one of the simplest ways to think about the Trinity. Ask two different questions:

WHAT is God?

And:

WHO is God?

Christianity answers:

WHAT?

One divine Being.

WHO?

Father. Son. Holy Spirit. So Christians aren't claiming: Three beings = one being. Or: Three persons = one person. That would be contradictory. We're saying:

ONE WHAT.

THREE WHOS.

One God. Three persons.

DON'T THINK OF GOD AS THREE PIECES

Sometimes we imagine the Trinity like a pie cut into thirds. Father = 33%. Son = 33%. Holy Spirit = 33%. Together they equal God. But that's not what Christianity teaches. The Father isn't one-third God. Jesus isn't one-third God. The Holy Spirit isn't one-third God. Each is fully divine. Not three pieces of God. Not three separate gods. One God eternally existing as Father, Son, and Spirit.

WHY ALL THE ANALOGIES EVENTUALLY BREAK

People have tried many illustrations. Water can be liquid, ice, and steam. An egg has shell, white, and yolk. The sun has the star itself, its light, and its heat. A person can be a father, husband, and son. These can help us think about aspects of the Trinity. But every analogy eventually breaks down. Water changes from one state to another. God doesn't switch between Father, Son, and Spirit. An egg has three parts. God isn't made of three parts. One person playing three roles would imply God is only one person wearing three different masks. That's not the Trinity either.

So perhaps the safest approach isn't trying to find something in creation that perfectly explains God. Nothing in creation is exactly like the Creator.

THINK ABOUT DIMENSIONS

Here's an illustration that may at least help us understand why something can exceed our categories without being logically impossible. Imagine a two-dimensional world. Everything is flat. Length and width. That's all its inhabitants have ever experienced. Now imagine a three-dimensional sphere passing through their world.

What would they see?

Not a sphere. They couldn't perceive three dimensions. They might first see a tiny circle. Then a larger circle. Then smaller again. Then nothing. From their perspective, what they encountered would be difficult to comprehend. Not because the sphere is irrational. Because their capacity to perceive it is limited. Perhaps something similar happens when finite human beings attempt to understand an infinite God. The Trinity isn't necessarily irrational. God may simply be greater than the categories our minds naturally use to understand reality.

READ IT TOGETHER

One of the clearest pictures of the Trinity occurs at Jesus' baptism. Read Matthew 3:13–17. Watch what happens. Jesus—the Son—is standing in the water. The Spirit descends like a dove. The Father's voice speaks from heaven:

> "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Father. Son. Spirit. All present. All distinct. All participating in the same moment. This is important because God isn't one person simply changing costumes. The Father loves the Son. The Son obeys the Father. The Spirit descends upon the Son. There is relationship within God Himself.

GOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN LOVE

And this leads to something beautiful. The Bible says:

> "God is love."

1 John 4:8

Think about that. It doesn't merely say: God loves. It says: God IS love. But love requires relationship.

Before God created humanity…

Before angels…

Before the universe…

Before anything existed except God…

Was there love?

Christianity says: Yes. Because God has eternally existed in relationship. The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. The Spirit participates in the eternal fellowship of God. God didn't create us because He was lonely. Love already existed within God. Creation is the overflow of a God whose very nature is relational love.

MAYBE RELATIONSHIP ISN'T SOMETHING GOD CREATED

We usually think God created relationships. But the Trinity reveals something deeper. Relationship exists within the very nature of God. Before there was a universe, there was relationship. Before there was humanity, there was love.

Before there was friendship, family, marriage, or community…

Father, Son, and Spirit existed in perfect loving communion. Maybe that's why relationships matter so much to us. Maybe that's why isolation hurts. Maybe that's why love feels so fundamental to being human. The Bible says humanity was made:

> "In the image of God."

Genesis 1:27

We were created by a relational God…

for relationship.

LOOK AT JESUS

Now consider how Jesus talks about His relationship with the Father. Jesus prays. Jesus listens. Jesus obeys. Jesus loves the Father. The Father loves the Son. And then Jesus makes an astonishing promise to His followers. He says the Holy Spirit will come and live within them. Christianity isn't simply saying:

"Believe that a triune God exists somewhere out there."

Jesus invites us into the life of God.

Through the Son…

we are reconciled to the Father…

and filled with the Spirit. Paul describes it beautifully:

"Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

Ephesians 2:18

Through the Son. By the Spirit. To the Father. That's the Christian life.

WRESTLE WITH IT

ISN'T THE TRINITY JUST SOMETHING THE CHURCH INVENTED LATER?

The vocabulary developed later. But the ingredients are already present in the earliest Christian writings. Early Christians were Jewish monotheists. They already believed: There is one God. Then they encountered Jesus. They watched Him. Heard His claims. Saw His crucifixion. And became convinced He had risen from the dead. They also experienced what they believed to be the presence of the Holy Spirit. So they had to wrestle with something: How can we continue believing there is one God while taking seriously everything we've encountered in Jesus and the Spirit?

The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't invented to complicate Christianity. It developed as Christians tried to faithfully describe the God they believed had revealed Himself.

BUT DOES IT HAVE TO MAKE PERFECT SENSE?

There's a difference between mystery and contradiction. A contradiction says: God is one person and God is three persons in exactly the same sense. Christianity doesn't say that. It says: God is one Being and three Persons. We can describe that. We can understand something about it.

But can we fully comprehend how an infinite God exists?

Probably not. And perhaps we shouldn't expect to.

If I could completely explain God…

If His entire existence could fit comfortably inside my categories…

If nothing about Him exceeded my understanding…

I might reasonably wonder whether I was actually describing God…

or simply a bigger version of myself.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

The Trinity isn't merely a theological puzzle to solve. It tells us something about who God is. The Father loves. The Son comes near. The Spirit lives within. The Father sends the Son. The Son gives His life. The Spirit brings God's presence into us. So ask:

Which person of the Trinity do you understand most easily?

Which is most difficult for you to understand?

Does "one What, three Whos" help clarify what Christians mean?

Why do you think relationship exists at the center of Christianity?

What does the Trinity tell you about God's nature?

How does it change your understanding of God to think that love existed before creation?

What questions do you still have?

You don't need to solve the mystery. You can know someone without knowing everything about them. Maybe that's especially true of God.

TRY THIS

Read John 14–16 sometime this week. As you read, look for three words: Father. Son. Spirit. Circle them if you're reading a physical Bible. Notice how Jesus describes their relationship.

Who sends?

Who speaks?

Who loves?

Who glorifies?

Who lives within believers?

Then ask:

What does this tell me about what God is like?

Maybe the Trinity isn't primarily a mathematical problem:

How can three equal one?

Maybe it's an invitation to discover something far more beautiful: At the center of ultimate reality isn't loneliness. It isn't power. It isn't cold impersonal energy. It's relationship. It's love. Father. Son. Spirit. Distinct, yet eternally one.

And astonishingly, the God who has eternally existed in perfect relationship…

invites us to know Him.

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 12

Why Does God Seem So Angry?

Why did God command the killing of people—including women and children—in the Bible?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Tyler had finally decided to read the Bible for himself. He started in Genesis and, to his surprise, found much of it fascinating. But as he kept reading, he encountered stories that bothered him. The flood. Sodom and Gomorrah. Wars. Entire cities destroyed. Commands involving men, women, and children. This didn't sound like the Jesus he'd heard Christians describe as loving, compassionate, and forgiving. A few weeks later, sitting across the table from a Christian friend, Tyler finally said what he'd been thinking:

"I don't understand your God. Christians say God is loving, but then I read parts of the Old Testament and He seems angry and violent. How can the God who says 'love your enemies' be the same God who commands judgment against entire groups of people?" Then he asked the question that bothered him most:

> "And what about the women and children? How is that fair?"

He wasn't trying to win an argument. He genuinely wanted to understand.

How can a God who is perfectly loving also be a God who judges?

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

Let's admit something right away. There are passages in the Bible that are difficult to read. Christians shouldn't pretend otherwise. The conquest of Canaan. The flood. Sodom and Gomorrah. Divine judgments. Wars involving Israel. And passages where God commands the destruction of entire populations. When we read about men, women, and children caught up in these judgments, something inside us recoils. And perhaps it should. Human life matters. Children matter. Violence should disturb us. So we shouldn't rush past the difficulty or offer a shallow answer like:

> "God did it, so don't question it."

Remember what we've said throughout this book: Questions aren't the enemy of faith. So let's ask the uncomfortable question honestly:

How can the God of love also be a God of judgment?

But maybe there's another question underneath that one: What if part of our difficulty isn't that we take sin too seriously—but that we don't take it seriously enough?

TALK ABOUT IT

Before going further, talk honestly.

When you think about the God of the Old Testament, what comes to mind?

Have you ever felt like the God of the Old Testament seems different from Jesus?

Which biblical stories involving judgment bother you most?

Do you think a loving God should ever judge people?

Is anger always wrong?

Do you believe some sins are worse than others?

What do you think someone actually deserves for doing wrong?

What would you expect a perfectly good God to do when confronted with evil?

Don't try to resolve the tension too quickly. Feel the weight of the question first.

WE CREATE CATEGORIES

Most of us have an internal scale for wrongdoing. At one end are things we consider really bad: Murder. Abuse. Trafficking. Genocide. At the other end are things we consider relatively harmless: Gossip. Pride. Greed. Lust. Dishonesty. Selfishness. Maybe even the occasional "little white lie." We create degrees of evil. And to be clear, the Bible itself recognizes that sins can have different earthly consequences and degrees of culpability. Murder and a dishonest thought don't cause the same amount of immediate harm. But there's another question:

What does all sin have in common?

Every sin, however different in consequence, falls short of the perfect holiness of God. Paul writes:

> "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:23

Not some. All. That changes the conversation. Because we tend to compare ourselves horizontally. I'm better than that person. I've never done what they did. Sure, I'm imperfect, but I'm basically a good person. But God isn't simply comparing one human being with another. The standard is His own perfect goodness. And suddenly the categories look different.

WHAT IF WE'RE ASKING THE QUESTION BACKWARD?

When we read stories of God's judgment, our immediate question is often:

"Why did God judge those people?"

But the larger biblical story raises an even more surprising question:

"Why doesn't God judge all of us immediately?"

If God is perfectly holy…

If all humanity has rebelled against Him…

If every one of us contributes in some way to the brokenness of His creation… Then perhaps judgment isn't the strange part of the Bible. Mercy is. Think about that. If perfect justice means evil is always confronted consistently, then humanity isn't owed mercy. The surprising thing isn't that there are moments in Scripture when judgment falls. The surprising thing is how often it doesn't. God waits. God warns. God pursues. God forgives. God relents when people repent. God gives another opportunity. And another. And another.

From that perspective, the occasional glimpses of judgment in Scripture show us what justice looks like. The overwhelming story of Scripture shows us how extraordinarily patient God has been with humanity.

IS ANGER ALWAYS WRONG?

We often associate anger with losing control. Someone explodes. Becomes abusive. Acts irrationally. Hurts someone. If that's what God's anger means, then we have a serious problem. But not all anger is evil. Imagine watching someone abuse a child and feeling absolutely nothing. That wouldn't make you more loving. It would reveal something missing in your love. Some things should make us angry. Injustice should make us angry. Abuse should make us angry. Exploitation should make us angry. Evil should make us angry. The Bible doesn't portray God's anger as uncontrolled human rage. It says:

"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."

Psalm 103:8

Notice those words: Slow to anger. God's anger isn't an unpredictable temper tantrum. It is His holy opposition to everything that corrupts and destroys His creation. God's anger isn't the opposite of His love. Sometimes God's anger exists precisely because He loves.

BUT WHY CAN'T GOD JUST OVERLOOK SIN?

That's what many of us really want. Why can't God simply say:

"Everyone makes mistakes. Let's forget about it."

But consider what we're asking.

Would we want God to overlook murder?

Abuse?

Racism?

Trafficking?

Genocide?

Probably not. We want justice for those things. So perhaps we'd say:

"Okay, judge the really bad things. Just overlook the smaller things."

But now we've created the standard.

And where exactly does the line go?

How many lies are acceptable?

How much greed?

How much hatred?

How much selfishness?

How much exploitation?

How much pride?

How much injustice?

At what point does a holy God finally say:

"This much evil doesn't matter"?

A perfectly holy God cannot call evil good simply because we consider a particular evil small. If God arbitrarily overlooked wrongdoing, He wouldn't be perfectly just. And this helps us understand something difficult: Grace isn't God pretending sin doesn't matter. Grace is God dealing with sin without giving us what our sin deserves.

SO WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN CANAAN?

This brings us to some of the hardest passages. When Israel enters the land of Canaan, God commands judgment against particular peoples. Read without context, it can sound as though God arbitrarily decided:

"Those people are different. Destroy them."

But that's not the reason Scripture gives. The biblical story describes cultures in which evil had become deeply entrenched. Violence. Sexual exploitation. Idolatrous practices. And even child sacrifice. God tells Israel:

> "It is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you."

Deuteronomy 9:4

But then something incredibly important happens. God tells Israel: Don't think you're better than them. Israel isn't receiving the land because Israel is innocent. And when Israel later embraces similar evil, God judges Israel too. God's judgment isn't based on ethnicity. It isn't: Good people versus bad people. The biblical claim is much more uncomfortable: None of us is righteous on our own.

GOD WAITED

There's another detail that's easy to miss. Hundreds of years before Israel enters Canaan, God tells Abraham that his descendants won't possess the land yet.

Why?

> "For the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

Genesis 15:16

God waits. Generation after generation passes. Whatever else we say about the conquest, the biblical narrative doesn't portray God impulsively waking up angry one morning. Judgment is delayed. Remember: Slow to anger. God's patience doesn't mean evil doesn't matter. It means judgment isn't His first response.

BUT WHAT ABOUT WOMEN AND CHILDREN?

This is where the question becomes hardest. Even if we understand judgment against a deeply corrupt society, we still ask:

What about women and children?

We shouldn't pretend that's easy. Christians have proposed different ways of understanding these passages. One important observation is that ancient warfare accounts often used sweeping victory language. Phrases such as:

> "Destroyed everything."
>
> "Left no survivors."
>
> "Completely destroyed."

could function as conventional descriptions of decisive military victory. We still use exaggerated language:

"They annihilated them."

"They destroyed the other team."

We don't mean every individual literally ceased to exist. Interestingly, some biblical accounts describe groups as completely destroyed and then later refer to members of those same groups still living in the region. That has led many interpreters to conclude that at least some conquest language reflects conventional ancient warfare rhetoric rather than a literal census reporting the death of every individual. That matters. But it doesn't remove the entire problem. Real warfare occurred. Real judgment occurred. Real people died. We shouldn't solve a difficult passage by pretending it isn't difficult.

WERE THEY INNOCENT?

This question gets even more uncomfortable. We naturally speak about "innocent people." And in an important human sense, we should. A child is innocent of the crimes committed by adults around them. A civilian may be innocent of a government's atrocities. Scripture itself distinguishes degrees of responsibility, knowledge, and accountability. But Christianity also makes a broader theological claim: No human being is morally perfect before a perfectly holy God. That does not mean everyone is equally guilty of every sin. It does not mean every person deserves the same earthly consequence.

And it certainly doesn't give human beings permission to harm others in the name of judgment. It means something deeper: None of us can ultimately stand before God and demand eternal life on the basis of our own righteousness. That's uncomfortable. But without understanding that, we'll never understand grace.

"THAT'S NOT FAIR"

Maybe you're thinking:

"But that still doesn't seem fair."

Fairness is an interesting word. If by fair we mean perfect and consistent justice, then fairness would mean God judges evil wherever He finds it. Not just Canaan's evil. Mine. Not just the sins that disgust me. The sins I excuse. Not just the person whose behavior I condemn. Me too. If we truly asked God for nothing but perfect justice, none of us would be asking for grace. Because grace, by definition, gives us something we haven't earned.

This leads to one of Christianity's most surprising claims: The scandal of the Bible isn't ultimately that guilty people are judged. It's that guilty people can be forgiven.

AND THAT CHANGES THE CROSS

This is where the entire question begins pointing toward Jesus. Because there actually is someone in the biblical story who suffers judgment despite being completely innocent. Jesus. He doesn't merely appear better than everyone else. Christianity claims He was without sin. Peter writes:

> "He committed no sin."

1 Peter 2:22

Yet Jesus is betrayed. Beaten. Mocked. Tortured. Crucified. And killed. If anyone could look toward heaven and say:

> "This isn't fair,"

it was Jesus. He didn't deserve judgment. We did. And yet Christianity makes the astonishing claim that He willingly took our place.

> "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."

1 Peter 3:18

Read that again: The righteous for the unrighteous.

THE MOST "UNFAIR" MOMENT IN THE BIBLE

We often look at God's judgment and say:

> "That's not fair."

Then we arrive at the cross. And suddenly we see the most undeserved suffering in the entire biblical story. The only truly sinless One bears the consequences of people who aren't. Jesus receives what He doesn't deserve so we can receive what we don't deserve. He receives judgment. We receive mercy. He takes our sin. We receive His righteousness. He experiences death. We receive life. Paul writes:

> "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

2 Corinthians 5:21

The cross isn't God deciding sin suddenly doesn't matter. It's the exact opposite. Sin matters so much that God doesn't simply overlook it. And: God loves us so much that He bears its cost Himself. That's where justice and mercy meet.

MAYBE WE'VE BEEN SURPRISED BY THE WRONG THING

Maybe when we read the Bible, we've been surprised by the wrong thing. We see judgment and ask:

"How could God do that?"

But once we understand His holiness and our sin, another question emerges:

"How has God been this patient with us?"

Why another sunrise?

Why another breath?

Why another opportunity?

Why forgiveness?

Why grace?

Why would God pursue people who rejected Him?

Why would Jesus eat with sinners?

Why would He forgive His enemies?

Why would He go to a cross?

Maybe judgment shouldn't make grace smaller. Maybe understanding judgment makes grace astonishing. The more seriously we take God's holiness, the more incredible His mercy becomes.

LOOK AT JESUS

If you ever wonder:

"What is this God really like?"

Christianity's answer is: Look at Jesus. Jesus said:

"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9

What do we see?

Jesus welcomes children. Touches lepers. Defends the vulnerable. Forgives sinners. Weeps with grieving families. Confronts hypocrisy. Loves enemies. Warns about

judgment. Offers mercy. And ultimately gives His life for the people who rebelled against Him. The God revealed in Jesus isn't indifferent to evil. But neither does He stand at a distance from its consequences. He steps into them.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Genesis 15:13–16, Deuteronomy 9:4–6, Jonah 3:6–10, and Romans 3:21–26. Together they give us four important pieces of the picture: God is patient. God is just. God shows mercy. God provides grace through Jesus. Then talk about it:

What does Genesis reveal about God's patience before judgment?

Why does God say the Canaanites are being judged?

Why does God warn Israel against believing they're morally superior?

What happens when Nineveh repents?

What happens to our understanding of justice when we include ourselves among those who have sinned?

According to Romans 3, how can God remain just while also forgiving sinners?

Does understanding judgment make God's grace more or less meaningful to you?

WRESTLE WITH IT

IS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT DIFFERENT FROM JESUS?

It can sometimes feel that way. Old Testament: Judgment. New Testament: Grace. But that's not actually the Bible's story. The Old Testament is filled with grace, patience, forgiveness, and mercy. And Jesus speaks seriously about sin and judgment. The difference isn't: Old Testament God = angry. Jesus = loving. The Bible presents the same God as: Holy and loving. Just and merciful. Patient and opposed to evil. And nowhere do those realities come together more powerfully than at the cross.

MAYBE GOD'S ANGER TELLS US SOMETHING ABOUT HIS GOODNESS

Imagine a God who never became angry. Never angry about Auschwitz. Never angry about slavery. Never angry about trafficking. Never angry about rape. Never angry about child abuse. Never angry about genocide.

Would we call that God loving?

Probably not. A good God must oppose evil. But here's the part that's harder to accept: We want God to be angry about the evil out there while being understanding about the evil in here. We want judgment for them. Grace for us. The gospel removes that illusion. We all need grace. The murderer needs grace. The liar needs grace. The self-righteous need grace. The immoral need grace. The religious need grace. We don't all sin in the same ways or produce the same consequences, but we all stand in need of the same Savior.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Maybe this question has bothered you for years. Don't dismiss it. Keep wrestling. Ask:

Which Old Testament passage troubles me most?

Have I investigated its historical and literary context?

Do I believe a good God should ultimately judge evil?

Do I tend to define "serious sin" as the sins other people commit?

Have I underestimated what God's holiness means?

If God gave me perfect justice rather than mercy, what would I actually be asking for?

Does understanding judgment change the way I see grace?

What does the cross reveal about both God's justice and His love?

And perhaps the biggest question: Could it be that the most surprising thing about God isn't that He judges—but that a perfectly holy God has gone to such extraordinary lengths to save?

TRY THIS

This week, read the story of Jonah. It's short. And you may discover something surprising. Jonah isn't angry because God judges people. He's angry because God doesn't. Nineveh was notorious for brutality. God warns them. They repent. And God shows mercy. Jonah thinks that isn't fair. Then Jonah reveals something extraordinary. He tells God that the reason he didn't want to preach to Nineveh was because he already knew what God was like:

> "You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love."

Jonah 4:2

Jonah's complaint is essentially:

> "God, I knew You'd be merciful."

What an extraordinary problem to have with God. The Bible's story isn't about an angry God looking for people to destroy.

It's about a holy God who cannot ignore evil…

yet continually looks for opportunities to show mercy. And eventually, instead of pouring judgment upon us, He steps into our place. Jesus takes what is ours. And offers us what is His. So perhaps the deepest question isn't:

"Why does God ever judge?"

Maybe it's:

"Why has God shown us so much mercy?"

And Christianity's answer is one word:

LOVE.

EXPLORE • CHAPTER 13

Is There An Unseen Realm?

Are angels and demons real—and how do they affect our world?

EVER BEEN HERE?

Ethan had always thought of angels and demons as belonging to one of two places: church stories or horror movies. Angels had wings and halos. Demons belonged in dark rooms with creepy music. Neither seemed particularly relevant to ordinary life.

Then one night around a fire, the conversation turned spiritual. A friend mentioned that the Bible describes an unseen world existing alongside the world we experience every day. Ethan laughed at first. "You actually believe there are angels and demons?" But then he became more serious. "If they're real, what are they doing? Are demons behind every bad thing that happens? Can they control people? And why can't we see any of this?" Suddenly the question wasn't about scary stories. It was much bigger: What if the world we can see isn't the whole world that exists?

WHY THIS QUESTION MATTERS

We tend to believe most strongly in what we can see. Touch. Measure. Photograph. Test. But even our everyday experience reminds us that reality is larger than what our senses immediately perceive. Radio waves move through the room around you. Wi-Fi signals carry information you can't see. Gravity constantly affects you, though you can't see gravity itself. Your eyes perceive only a limited range of the electromagnetic spectrum. None of that proves angels or demons exist. But it does remind us of something important:

> "I can't see it" isn't the same thing as "it isn't real."

Christianity makes an even bigger claim. The universe contains both a visible and an unseen dimension. Paul writes:

> "For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible."

Colossians 1:16

If that's true, then reality may be bigger than we've imagined.

TALK ABOUT IT

Before going further:

Do you believe there's a spiritual realm?

What shaped your beliefs about angels and demons?

Have movies or popular culture influenced how you picture them?

Have you ever experienced something you would describe as spiritual?

Do you think evil is entirely explained by human behavior?

If angels and demons exist, how much influence do you think they have?

Does the idea of an unseen realm make you curious, uncomfortable, skeptical—or something else?

There's no need to manufacture a spiritual experience. We're simply asking:

What does Christianity actually claim?

THE BIBLE DESCRIBES TWO REALMS

From beginning to end, the Bible assumes there is more to reality than what human beings can see. There is the physical world. People. Animals. Mountains. Oceans. Cities. Bodies. And there is an unseen spiritual realm. God. Angels. Spiritual beings. And forces opposed to God. The Bible doesn't treat these as two completely disconnected universes. They interact. Sometimes visibly. Usually invisibly. One fascinating example occurs in 2 Kings. An enemy army surrounds the prophet Elisha and his servant. The servant wakes up, sees the soldiers, and panics. Elisha remains calm. Then he prays:

> "Open his eyes, LORD, so that he may see."

2 Kings 6:17

Suddenly the servant sees something that had apparently been there all along: An unseen army surrounding them. The circumstances hadn't changed. His awareness of reality had.

SO WHAT ARE ANGELS?

Forget the chubby babies with wings from Renaissance paintings. That's not the biblical picture. The word translated angel means messenger. Angels are created spiritual beings who serve God and carry out His purposes. Throughout Scripture they: Deliver messages. Protect. Worship God. Carry out assignments. Strengthen people. And sometimes participate in God's judgment. Hebrews describes them as:

"Ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."

Hebrews 1:14

Angels aren't dead human beings who received wings. The Bible describes angels and humans as distinct kinds of created beings. And angels aren't meant to be worshiped. They point toward God, not themselves.

DO WE HAVE GUARDIAN ANGELS?

The Bible certainly describes angels protecting and serving people. Psalm 91 says:

"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

Psalm 91:11

Jesus also makes intriguing comments about angels associated with children. But Scripture doesn't give us enough information to confidently construct an elaborate system where every person has one personally assigned angel following them everywhere.

Could God assign angels to protect people?

Absolutely.

Does Scripture describe angelic protection?

Yes.

Should we become obsessed with identifying our angel?

No. The Bible consistently redirects our attention: Don't pursue angels. Pursue God.

WHERE DID DEMONS COME FROM?

The Bible presents Satan and demonic powers as spiritual beings in rebellion against God. Exactly how every detail of that rebellion unfolded isn't explained as neatly as we might like. What Scripture makes clear is that evil exists not only within human hearts but also within a spiritual rebellion against God. Jesus refers to Satan as:

"The evil one."

"The father of lies."

"The prince of this world."

Paul describes:

"Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Ephesians 6:12

So Christianity sees evil as operating on more than one level. There is personal evil—the sinful choices human beings make. There is systemic evil—sin embedded in cultures, institutions, and systems. And there is spiritual evil—intelligent forces opposed to God and His purposes. Sometimes those dimensions overlap.

DOES THAT MEAN A DEMON CAUSES EVERYTHING BAD?

No. This is an important distinction. The Bible doesn't blame Satan for every problem. Sometimes we suffer because the world is broken. Sometimes because someone else makes a destructive choice. Sometimes because we make a destructive choice. Sometimes our bodies get sick. Sometimes accidents happen. Sometimes we're tempted by our own desires. James writes:

> "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed."

James 1:14

Not every flat tire is spiritual warfare. Not every argument is demonic. Not every illness is caused by an evil spirit. Not every negative thought is Satan speaking. We shouldn't see a demon behind every bush. But Christianity also warns us against making the opposite mistake: Pretending the spiritual realm doesn't exist at all.

TWO DITCHES

When it comes to the unseen realm, people often fall into one of two extremes.

OBSESSION

Everything becomes spiritual warfare. Every problem is a demon. Every coincidence is a sign. Every difficult person is spiritually possessed. Fear and superstition begin controlling life. That's unhealthy.

DISMISSAL

The other extreme says:

> "Spiritual beings are primitive superstition. None of that is real."

But if Christianity is true, that view leaves out an entire dimension of reality. Biblical Christianity avoids both extremes. Don't obsess over the darkness. Don't ignore it either. Be aware. Be discerning. And keep your attention centered on Jesus.

HOW DOES SPIRITUAL EVIL ACTUALLY WORK?

Popular culture usually makes demonic activity spectacular. Possession. Objects flying across rooms. Terrifying voices. Strange supernatural manifestations. The Bible does contain dramatic encounters with evil spirits. But Scripture also describes something far more ordinary. Deception. Jesus calls Satan:

> "The father of lies."

John 8:44

That may be one of the most important things to understand about spiritual warfare. Sometimes the most dangerous spiritual attack isn't something frightening happening in your house. It's a lie you begin believing in your mind. God doesn't love you. You can't trust Him. Your life doesn't matter. You need this to be happy. No one will know. You'll never change. You are what you've done. Forgiveness isn't possible. God is holding out on you. Notice something interesting. The first spiritual attack recorded in the Bible begins with a question:

> "Did God really say…?"

Genesis 3:1

The attack is aimed at truth and trust.

THE BATTLE OFTEN HAPPENS IN ORDINARY PLACES

Paul writes:

> "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood."

Ephesians 6:12

That doesn't mean people aren't responsible for their actions. It means there's sometimes more happening than what we immediately see. Spiritual evil works through things like: Lies. Temptation. Accusation. Division. Fear. Deception. Idolatry. Hatred. Despair. Destructive desire.

Sometimes spiritual warfare looks less like a horror movie…

and more like ordinary lies producing extraordinary destruction. A lie becomes a belief. A belief shapes a decision. A decision becomes a habit. A habit begins controlling a life. That's why truth matters so much.

CAN DEMONS CONTROL PEOPLE?

The Gospels clearly describe people experiencing severe demonic oppression, sometimes called possession. Jesus encounters them repeatedly. But notice what happens every time. Jesus has authority. Demons don't intimidate Him. Jesus doesn't perform elaborate rituals trying to convince them to leave. He commands. They obey. One encounter describes a man so tormented that he lived among tombs, isolated from everyone, harming himself and unable to be restrained. Then Jesus arrives. After Jesus delivers him, people find the man:

> "Sitting there, dressed and in his right mind."

Mark 5:15

That's an important picture. The goal of Jesus isn't spectacle. It's restoration.

CAN A CHRISTIAN BE POSSESSED?

Christians differ on some of the terminology and details surrounding demonic oppression. But the New Testament's emphasis for believers is remarkably consistent: You belong to Jesus. The Holy Spirit dwells within you. You aren't instructed to live terrified that a demon might suddenly take ownership of you. Instead, believers are told:

> "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

James 4:7

The Christian posture isn't fear. It's awareness combined with confidence in Christ.

READ IT TOGETHER

Read Mark 5:1–20. Notice the contrast between the man before and after encountering Jesus. Then talk about it:

What had evil done to this man's life?

How does Jesus respond to him?

Who appears to have authority in the encounter?

What changes after Jesus intervenes?

What does this story reveal about Jesus?

Why do you think the restored man wants to stay with Jesus?

What does Jesus tell him to do afterward?

The point of the story isn't:

"Look how powerful demons are."

The point is:

"Look how powerful Jesus is."

WHAT ABOUT ANGELS?

Here's something interesting. The Bible talks about angels. But it rarely encourages us to spend much time thinking about them.

Why?

Because angels aren't the center of the story. Jesus is. Angels announce His birth. Angels minister to Him. Angels appear at His resurrection. But they're always pointing somewhere else. Toward God. Maybe there's a lesson there. A healthy understanding of the unseen realm should make us more aware of God, not more fascinated with spiritual beings.

LOOK AT JESUS

The Gospels present Jesus as having extraordinary authority over the unseen realm. He commands demons. They obey. He confronts temptation. He remains faithful. He sends His followers with spiritual authority. And through His death and resurrection, the New Testament says something cosmic happened. Paul writes that Jesus:

"Disarmed the powers and authorities."

Colossians 2:15

The cross wasn't merely about individual forgiveness. It was a victory over the powers of evil. And the resurrection announces: Jesus wins. That's crucial. Christianity doesn't present God and Satan as two equal powers locked in an uncertain battle. This isn't: Good God versus evil god. Satan is created. God is Creator. Satan's power is limited. God's isn't. The outcome isn't uncertain.

WHAT ABOUT SPIRITUAL WARFARE?

That phrase can sound dramatic. But look at the equipment Paul gives Christians in Ephesians 6. Truth. Righteousness. Peace. Faith. Salvation. The Word of God. Prayer.

Interesting, isn't it?

No magical formulas. No obsession with demons. Instead: Know what's true. Live what's right. Trust God. Know who you are. Know Scripture. Pray. Perhaps spiritual warfare is

often much more practical than we've imagined. When a lie comes— choose truth. When temptation comes— choose obedience. When accusation comes— remember grace. When fear comes— choose faith. When division comes— pursue peace. When darkness comes— stay close to Jesus.

WRESTLE WITH IT

ISN'T BELIEF IN DEMONS JUST AN ANCIENT EXPLANATION FOR MENTAL ILLNESS?

This is an important question. The Bible distinguishes between ordinary sickness and demonic affliction in several places rather than treating them as identical. That matters. Christians should be very careful about casually labeling mental illness, neurological conditions, trauma, or physical disease as demonic. People can need physicians. Counselors. Medication. Community. Prayer. And sometimes several forms of care together. Recognizing a spiritual dimension to reality doesn't require us to reject medical or psychological explanations.

If God created the whole person, physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual realities can all matter.

SHOULD I BE AFRAID?

This may be the most important question in the chapter.

If there's an unseen realm...

If spiritual evil is real...

Should we be afraid?

Jesus' answer seems remarkably consistent: No. Not because evil isn't real. But because evil isn't ultimate. John writes:

> "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

1 John 4:4

Christian confidence isn't:

> "There is no darkness."

It's:

> "The darkness isn't greater than Jesus."

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Maybe you've never thought much about the unseen realm. Or maybe you've thought about it too much. Either way, ask:

Do I tend toward dismissing spiritual reality or obsessing over it?

What lies am I most tempted to believe?

Where does fear have too much influence in my life?

Are there destructive patterns I've normalized?

How would believing in an unseen realm change the way I understand prayer?

Does knowing Jesus has authority over spiritual evil change how I think about it?

What questions about angels or demons do I still have?

And perhaps ask something even deeper: If there is an unseen battle over truth, what voices am I allowing to shape what I believe?

TRY THIS

Read Ephesians 6:10–18. Paul describes what he calls the armor of God. As you read, notice every piece. Truth. Righteousness. Peace. Faith. Salvation. Scripture. Prayer. Then ask yourself:

Where am I most vulnerable right now?

Is there a lie I need to replace with truth?

A temptation I need to resist?

A relationship where I need to pursue peace?

A fear I need to entrust to God?

Something I need to bring into the light?

Then pray simply:

"Jesus, help me recognize what is true."

"Give me discernment where I have been deceived."

"Protect me from evil."

"Help me resist what pulls me away from You."

"Teach me to live without fear."

Because Christianity doesn't invite us to become fascinated with darkness. It invites us to walk in the light. And perhaps that's the most important thing to understand about the unseen realm:

THERE MAY BE MORE HAPPENING THAN WE CAN SEE.

But we don't need to be afraid of what we can't see…

when we know the One who sees it all.

THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

This isn't the end. It's an invitation to keep pursuing. We started with a question:

Is there more?

Maybe you picked up this booklet because you were curious. Maybe a friend invited you into these conversations. Maybe you've believed in God for years but realized there were questions you'd never really explored. Maybe you're skeptical. Maybe somewhere along the way, something changed. Jesus became more than a name. The Bible became more than an old book. Grace became more than a religious word. And Christianity began to look less like a religion you join and more like a Person inviting you to follow Him. Wherever you are right now, there's something important to remember:

You don't have to have everything figured out to keep pursuing.

QUESTIONS AREN'T THE ENEMY OF FAITH

You may still have questions. Probably a lot of them. That's okay. There are questions this little booklet couldn't possibly address.

What about evolution?

What about sexuality?

What about other religions?

What about unanswered prayer?

What about contradictions people claim are in the Bible?

What about Christians who've done terrible things?

What about people who have never heard about Jesus?

What about the parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand?

Keep asking. Christianity doesn't require you to become intellectually dishonest. Truth doesn't need to be protected from honest questions. But don't only pursue answers. Pursue Jesus. Because it's possible to know a lot about Christianity without ever actually knowing Christ.

DON'T PURSUE ALONE

There's a reason you were encouraged to work through these conversations with another person. We were never meant to pursue God alone. Jesus formed a community. He ate at tables. Walked roads. Asked questions. Listened. Taught. Prayed. Laughed. Wept. And shared life with people. Following Jesus still works that way. So don't let the final page of this booklet become the end of the relationship that brought you here. Keep meeting. Get coffee. Share a meal. Take a walk. Sit around a fire. Open the Bible. Ask questions. Talk about what you're learning. Talk about what you're struggling with. Pray for each other.

Some of life's most important conversations happen when two people simply make space for each other.

KEEP LOOKING AT JESUS

If you're wondering what to do next, start here: Keep discovering Jesus. Read one of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—with the friend who walked through this booklet with you. Don't make it complicated. Read a chapter. Then ask:

What do I notice about Jesus?

What surprises me?

What questions do I have?

What does Jesus reveal about God?

What would change in my life if I actually lived what Jesus is teaching?

Then do it again. You don't need a classroom. You don't need to be a Bible expert. Sometimes all you need is: Two people. An open Bible. An honest conversation. And a willingness to pursue Jesus together.

IF YOU'RE STILL NOT SURE

Maybe you've reached the end of these conversations and you're still not ready to call yourself a Christian. That's okay. Don't fake certainty. But don't stop searching either. Ask yourself:

What is still keeping me from Jesus?

Is it intellectual?

Is there evidence you still need to investigate?

Is it personal?

Did something happen that made trusting God difficult?

Is it relational?

Have Christians represented Jesus poorly to you?

Or could it be something deeper?

Maybe part of you suspects that if Jesus really is who He claimed to be, following Him might require surrendering something you don't want to surrender. Whatever it is, name it. Talk about it. Investigate it. And keep praying the prayer we've returned to throughout these conversations:

"God, if You're real, help me recognize You."

"If You want to be known, show me what You're like."

"Jesus, help me see You for who You really are."

You don't need to pretend. Just keep pursuing.

IF YOU'VE DECIDED TO FOLLOW JESUS

Maybe something different has happened. Somewhere during these conversations, you realized: I believe. Not that you understand everything. Not that every doubt disappeared. But you've decided to put the weight of your life on Jesus. If that's you, congratulations. But understand something important: Making a decision to follow Jesus isn't the finish line. It's the starting line. Jesus didn't simply say:

"Believe something about Me."

He said:

"Follow Me."

And following requires movement.

START HERE

You don't need to change everything overnight. Start with a few simple steps.

TALK WITH JESUS

Pray. Don't worry about sounding religious. Talk to God honestly. Thank Him. Ask questions. Confess when you fail. Ask for help. Learn to recognize His presence throughout your day.

LISTEN TO JESUS

Read Scripture. Start with the Gospels. Learn His words. Watch His life. Notice how He treats people. Pay attention to what He says about God, yourself, relationships, money, forgiveness, sexuality, power, purpose, and eternity. Then practice what you're learning.

WALK WITH PEOPLE

Find other people who genuinely want to follow Jesus. You need friends who will encourage you, challenge you, pray for you, and walk beside you. Following Jesus is personal. But it was never meant to be private.

FIND A CHURCH

Find a healthy community centered on Jesus and Scripture. Show up. Build relationships. Ask questions. Serve. Worship. Learn. Don't just attend. Belong.

GET BAPTIZED

Jesus asked His followers to publicly identify themselves with Him through baptism. If you've decided to follow Jesus and haven't been baptized, talk with the person walking through this booklet with you or a church leader about taking that step.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Tell someone what is happening in your life. You don't need to know every answer. You don't need to become a theologian. You can simply say:

> "I've started following Jesus."

Your story matters.

AND THEN DO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Think about how this journey began. Someone made space for you. Someone listened. Someone allowed you to ask questions. Someone opened the Bible with you. Someone talked about Jesus without pressuring you. Someone walked beside you. Now imagine doing the same thing for someone else. A friend. A coworker. A neighbor. A teammate. A family member. Someone who has questions. Someone who has been hurt by religion. Someone who isn't sure what they believe. Someone quietly wondering:

Is there more?

You don't have to convince them. You don't have to have every answer. You don't have to preach at them. Just pull up another chair. Listen. Ask questions. Share what you're

discovering. Open this booklet. And start another conversation. Because sometimes following Jesus begins with something as ordinary as one friend saying to another:

"I've been thinking about some big questions lately. Want to talk about them?"

ONE FRIEND. ONE CONVERSATION. ONE PURSUIT.

Maybe that's how movements begin. Not always on stages. Not always in large rooms. Sometimes they begin across a table. Over coffee. Around a fire. During lunch. On a long drive. In a living room. Two people willing to be honest about life's biggest questions. And somewhere in the conversation— Jesus becomes visible. One friend discovers Jesus. Then helps another friend discover Jesus. Who helps another. And another. The conversation keeps moving. The table keeps expanding. The pursuit continues.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Before you close this booklet, ask each other one final question:

WHAT IS MY NEXT STEP?

Don't answer for each other. Listen. Maybe your next step is to investigate another question. Maybe it's to read a Gospel. Maybe it's to pray for the first time. Maybe it's to trust Jesus. Maybe it's baptism. Maybe it's joining a community. Maybe it's surrendering something. Maybe it's inviting another friend into the conversation. Whatever it is: Take the next step. You don't have to see the entire road. Just take the next step toward Jesus.

We began with a question:

IS THERE MORE?

After everything we've explored, Christianity gives an extraordinary answer. Yes. There is more. There is a God who made you. A Jesus who came for you. A cross where grace was offered to you. An empty tomb that gives hope to you. A Spirit who can transform you. A community to walk beside you. A purpose bigger than you. And a life that death cannot ultimately take from you. So keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep following. Keep inviting others. Keep pursuing. Because perhaps the end of this booklet isn't really an ending at all. It's an invitation to pull up a chair and begin another conversation.