

7 Things We Misunderstand

A Message to the Modern Church

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1. We misunderstand how holy God is.

So when the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God. (Exodus 3:4-6)

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. ... So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:1, 5)

And He did a wondrous thing while Manoah and his wife looked on—it happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar—the Angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar! When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. When the Angel of the Lord appeared no more to Manoah and his wife, then Manoah knew that He was the Angel of the Lord. And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God!" (Judges 13:19b-22)

Consider, for a moment, how these people in the Bible reacted when they encountered the living God (who actually appeared quite a few times in the Old Testament as the preincarnate Christ, before being born of Mary). Moses hid his face, afraid to look at God. Isaiah immediately recognized his lost, sinful, wretched condition. Manoah, who was the father of Samson, fell to the ground and thought he and his wife would die because they had seen God. Indeed, God once told Moses that no one can see Him and live (see Exodus 33:20).

Although God no longer interacts with people the same way He did before the Bible was complete, He does not change (see Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8). God is still the same God He has always been—a God who is full of mercy, grace, and love, but also a God who hates sin because of how perfectly holy He is.

Many well-intentioned people, wanting to make God more desirable or accessible to us, have changed the popular image of God throughout our modern-day society. Unfortunately, this has had a devastating effect on how seriously we take God's warnings. God is not in any way like a kind-hearted grandpa or the fictional idea of Santa Claus, someone who gives warnings and tells you not to be naughty but in the end still gives you whatever you ask for.

God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day. (Psalm 7:11)

Because God is holy, He must hate sin. Because God is a just judge and everything He does is right, He must punish sin. Therefore, "God is angry with the wicked every day." He doesn't wink at the sinner like a kind-hearted grandpa might do. He can't ignore those sins we see as insignificant. Even a so-called little sins are a big deal to God because of how completely, perfectly holy He is.

Even in this world, we want judges to be fair and to punish those who break the law. No one would respect a judge who let all of the guilty criminals go free. So why do we lower our standards and expectations when it comes to the awesome and holy God of the universe? Our standards should be higher for God, not lower. Earthly judges can make mistakes because people aren't perfect and no one knows everything. But God sees and knows all things and He will let no sin—even "little sins"—go unpunished.

Consider how mighty God is, and how much He hates sin, as you read these verses:

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:30-31)

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:28-29)

Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die." And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was. (Exodus 20:18-21)

"Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the Lord had said to Moses, "Say to the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you.' " (Exodus 33:3-5a)

Now when the people complained, it displeased the Lord; for the Lord heard it, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the Lord burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and when Moses prayed to the Lord, the fire was quenched. (Numbers 11:1-2)

Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. (Deuteronomy 4:23-24)

You are indeed angry, for we have sinned—in these ways we continue; and we need to be saved. But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is no one who calls on Your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have consumed us because of our iniquities. (Isaiah 64:5b-7)

“For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:6-7)

God is still the same today as He was back then. This is not just the God of the Old Testament, as some people mistakenly believe. If that were the case, then God is capable of changing, and everything we know about God would have to be questioned. Thankfully, God cannot change, which means He is still as full of both love and wrath today as He was thousands of years ago.

Malachi 3:6 is a wonderful verse because it not only reminds us of God’s unchanging nature, it also puts both His love and wrath on display. Because He does not change, those who belong to Him are not consumed by the fire of His wrath, even when sins are committed against Him. He loves His people no matter what because He has chosen to do so, and He cannot change.

However, the verse also shows us how we all deserve His wrath, and those who do not belong to Him will receive His wrath as they spend eternity in hell. That is an unpopular message in our modern-day church, but it is just as true today as it always has been. Hell is a very real place because a holy God must punish sin, and Jesus told us that many people will spend eternity there because they never trusted in Jesus for salvation (see Matthew 7:13-14).

God is not just “the man upstairs.” He is the perfectly holy, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the universe and He deserves to be respected and feared as such. But we are wretched, sinful creatures, who continually sin against the Holy One who gave us life and sustains us every single moment of every day. We fail to see that we are very, very different from God.

2. We misunderstand how different we are from God.

Then Job answered the Lord and said: “I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’ I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1-6)

*What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?
(Psalm 8:4)*

David certainly had the right perspective when he wrote that verse in Psalm 8. Too often, we are surprised when bad things happen or when things don’t turn out the way we expect. On the contrary, we should be surprised that God even thinks about us at all. That’s an astounding picture of how insignificant we are compared to God.

Job, on the other hand, did not quite seem to have the proper perspective. Though Job “did not sin with his lips” (Job 1:22 and 2:10), he nevertheless struggled to understand why God had allowed everything to be taken from him. God responded, not as we might expect, but by reminding Job of all the amazing things He had created and continued to sustain. We read God’s response to Job through 70 consecutive verses (see Job 38-39). Job, in a state of shock, gives a brief response, then God continues to extol His magnificent power for another 53 verses. Although the Bible was not originally recorded in chapter and verse, it is astounding to think about the sheer length of God’s response.

Though Job was already a God-fearing man, he was ultimately crushed lower in humility as he came to realize just how different he was from God. Job briefly responded once God finished speaking, admitting he had uttered things which he did not understand. He concluded by abhorring himself and repenting “in dust and ashes.” Although Job lived a life that we would all consider to be morally good compared to most people, he wasn’t nearly as good as God.

As humans, grasping that truth is among our biggest challenges. We all like to compare ourselves to one another and think thoughts along the lines of, “sure, I’ve done some things I shouldn’t have, but I’m not nearly as bad as that person over there.” Due to the pride that each and every one of us deals with to some degree, we all face that struggle. Even Adolf Hitler, who most people would choose as one of the worst humans who ever lived, believed he was accomplishing something good by following Charles Darwin’s ideas and purifying his bloodline.

While comparing ourselves to one another might make us feel better in the moment, it actually creates a lot of problems when we begin to consider our standing before God. The reality is, we should avoid comparing ourselves to one another. It is only counter-productive. Instead, we need to compare ourselves to God, who is our ultimate standard.

You can always compare yourself to other people who will make you look like a good person, but you will never look like a good person compared to God—and that’s the point. Only when we realize we’re not good will we recognize our desperate need of a Savior. Consider these two passages from Psalms:

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one. (Psalm 14:1-3)

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, and have done abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. God looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek God. Every one of them has turned aside; they have together become corrupt; there is none who does good, no, not one. (Psalm 53:1-3)

There is none who does good, no, not one. Anything that is written once in the Bible is truth, but when we have two passages that are nearly identical, we should really pay attention to what we are being told. The Bible is undeniably clear: From God’s perspective, since God is the one speaking here, no one does good. We are all corrupt; we all do things that are exceedingly sinful in the eyes of God. No one can think, “I am a good person” if the

perspective is what it needs to be. In addition, if giving us this thought twice in Psalms wasn't enough, God repeats virtually the same words once more in the book of Romans. Much of the third chapter of Romans, in fact, reinforces this concept, which we desperately need to hear:

As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Pause and think on that for a moment. Keep in mind, God isn't describing that small group of really awful people. He is describing all of us—you, your friends, your enemies—every human being, without exception. That is how wretchedly sinful we are from God's perspective. Sadly, you won't hear this message proclaimed in many churches today, because it doesn't make us feel good. But it's in the Bible, it is the truth, and we need to hear it. Here are just two more of the numerous verses in the Bible that confirm this truth:

But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. (Isaiah 64:6)

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

If we were good people, we wouldn't need a Savior. But we do need a Savior, desperately, because even the good things we do are like filthy rags before God. Then, when we view ourselves properly, these encounters between people and God make more sense:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed." (Matthew 8:5-8)

When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:4-8)

We all know that Adam and Eve hid from God after they had committed the first sin, but it is tempting to think that God was far too harsh when He killed Aaron’s sons just because they offered incense to the Lord when He had not commanded them to do so. It does seem awfully harsh, does it not? But that point of view comes from our prideful human perspective. And God hates our pride, because everything belongs to Him. That’s why, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (see Proverbs 3:34, James 4:6, and 1 Peter 5:5).

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

No one can perfectly obey God’s law. God did not give us the Ten Commandments and other laws that we find throughout Scripture to show us how to be good enough to earn our way into heaven. That was the mistake that the Pharisees (the religious leaders in Jesus’ day) made—they were so proud of themselves for how well they obeyed the law. But Jesus harshly rebuked them for their pride and arrogance on a number of different occasions because they had missed the whole point of the law.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:19)

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:21-24)

God gave us the law to show us our guilt, to make us realize that we cannot do it on our own and that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Nothing we can do can enable us to earn a place in heaven. But Jesus came, fully obeyed God’s law, and did something we cannot do by being completely sinless, enabling Him to sacrifice Himself on the cross and take the punishment that we all deserve.

We are nothing like God at all. We are not pretty good people who need a little help from Jesus to make it through the day. There are all kinds of false teachings out there that try to build people up, but they are rooted in the humanistic idea of self-esteem that is not biblical. Jesus never did that. Instead, He told it like it was—He continually told people that they were sinners and needed to come to Him, the one and only Savior. We still need to hear that today.

3. We misunderstand who Jesus really is.

And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34)

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, "Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!" (John 2:13-16)

"Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." (Luke 6:22-26)

"Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division." (Luke 12:51)

Who was Jesus? Many people think He was a nice man who taught people how they should live, someone who healed people and helped them with their problems in life. Is that how you see Jesus?

If it is, you have missed out on who Jesus really is. The first verse quoted above shows us what Jesus was focused on during his time on earth. When He was moved with compassion for a large group of people, it wasn't because they were struggling with finances, health, or relationship problems. Jesus did heal people, but only to prove that He truly had the power of God and that He was who He claimed to be. Jesus had compassion on them because they did not understand the things of God, and that is what He began to teach them.

But Jesus didn't go around proclaiming peace and happiness, as the other verses quoted above clearly show. On numerous occasions, He strongly rebuked those who were sinning against God. He most often rebuked the Pharisees, whose great sin was pride; they thought they could work hard at obeying the law and earn their place in heaven.

The same type of rebuke can be applied to anyone who is trying to earn their own way into heaven rather than recognizing that there is nothing we can do to earn a place there. Only by realizing we cannot do it on our own, repenting from sin, and turning and following Jesus Christ can we hope for an eternity with Him in heaven.

Jesus plainly said that He did not come to give peace on earth, but division. Some people will believe in His truth while others will not, and this often leads to divisions among family and friends. Anyone who preaches or teaches messages of peace, happiness, and

harmony for everyone is teaching a false gospel. That is not what the Bible tells us, and that is clearly contrary to what Jesus taught. Understanding God's truth is infinitely more important than being happier or feeling better about ourselves in the moment.

What did Jesus teach? He taught on many things, but there is one significant topic which He spoke frequently about that is often pushed aside in modern-day churches. Jesus warned against hell more than anyone else in the Bible. No matter how much we may not like to think about hell, it is a very real place where many people will spend eternity. Hell must exist because, as previously discussed, a holy and just God must punish sin.

Jesus warned against hell out of His love for people and for the truth. If a friend or family member of yours is getting ready to make a choice that you know will be harmful, don't you love that person enough to warn him or her about the dangers that will follow? In a similar way, warning people about hell isn't mean; it is actually the most loving thing to do.

Penn Jillette, of the magician duo Penn & Teller, is an atheist, but he understands what true Christians should do better than many people who are in the church. He once said, "I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

He gets it, and he doesn't even believe in God. Jesus clearly knew that it is important and loving to warn people about the dangers of hell. Why, then, do we so often fail to show that kind of love and warn people about hell ourselves?

"And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. ... Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?" (Matthew 23:12, 33)

Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out." (Luke 13:23-28)

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched— where ‘Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ ”
(Mark 9:43-44)

“And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:30)

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”
(John 3:16-21)

This is how Jesus preached and taught people. He didn't preach happy, feel-good messages. He warned people about the dangers of hell and told them they needed to repent and trust in Him, because that is the only path to a true relationship with God, and it is the only path to eternal life. No, Jesus never said that His way was one of many paths to heaven. He clearly, undeniably stated that His path is the only way. There is no other way to heaven.

From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17)

“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:35-38)

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6)

Not only did Jesus not proclaim a message of happiness and prosperity in this life, but He actually taught the exact opposite. He promises that His true followers can expect to face trials and troubles and to be persecuted for following Him. It is easy for us who live in the United States to miss that message, because we have been blessed with so many freedoms when it comes to worshipping God (though some of those have recently been taken away from us). But many Christians throughout history, and even today in some parts of the world, have faced severe persecution such as being thrown in jail, beaten severely, or killed for their faith.

“These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever

kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:1-3, 33)

And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.” Then Peter began to say to Him, “See, we have left all and followed You.” So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.” (Mark 10:26-30)

“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.” (John 15:18-21)

“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” (John 17:14-16)

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. ... And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. ... Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” (Matthew 10:16-18, 22, 34)

And He said to [the demons], “Go.” So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. ... And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region. And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region. (Matthew 8:32, 34)

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” ... From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” But Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (John 6:60, 66-69)

Jesus also made it clear that the path to heaven is narrow. Many people believe they can earn their way there by doing good works, but our holy God doesn't look at things the same way we do, because no one is good compared to Him. The following passage is perhaps the most somber in the whole Bible. Jesus warned that many people go to church and think they are saved, but they actually are not. Are you one of them?

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. ... Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ ” (Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23)

Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?” (Luke 9:23-25)

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

My hope and prayer is that it is now clear to you that Jesus did not come in the New Testament to proclaim messages of peace and happiness in this life. God did not change between the Old Testament and the New; He still hates sin and must punish it. As we will look at more closely in the final section of this booklet, the purpose of the whole Bible is to point us to Jesus Christ. Do you truly know Him? Have you truly repented from your sins so that you no longer walk with the world but walk with Jesus Christ instead? Don't answer quickly; take some time to think about this and be sure. Your eternity depends on it.

Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

“O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me.” (John 17:25)

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” (John 14:21)

If we fail to understand the message that Jesus proclaimed, then we will also fail to understand what true salvation looks like and why God saves anyone at all.

4. We misunderstand what salvation looks like.

Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:20-21)

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:19)

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:21-24)

The purpose of the law was discussed some in section two, but it is important enough to repeat. No one can earn their own salvation. Nothing that we ever do can be good enough to please God. Why, then, did God give us a law that we are unable to obey? He gave us the law precisely for that reason—to show us that we are sinners, that we have no hope on our own, and that we desperately need a Savior.

To say it another way, God did not give us the law so that we could try to earn salvation by obeying it; He gave us the law to show us that we are unable to obey it and that we need the free gift of salvation that is offered through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

But salvation is not as simple as walking down the aisle at church, making a profession of faith, and being baptized. Sadly, misled by pastors who are often well-intentioned but misguided, many people have done those things and believe themselves to be saved when they actually are not. There is much more to salvation than merely doing those things.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:1-8)

A change takes place during salvation. A person is actually born again spiritually. First, a person who is being saved will recognize their unworthiness and their sinful condition.

“It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.” (John the Baptist speaking in John 1:27)

The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed.” (Matthew 8:8)

But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. (Isaiah 64:6)

And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:14-15)

“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:13-14)

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8)

John and the centurion recognized their unworthiness. Paul, Peter, and the tax collector knew they were wretched sinners, hopeless without a Savior. But it’s not just those people. We are all in the exact same condition. The third chapter of Romans makes it clear better than perhaps any other passage in the Bible:

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written:

*“There is none righteous, no, not one;
There is none who understands;
There is none who seeks after God.
They have all turned aside;
They have together become unprofitable;
There is none who does good, no, not one.”
“Their throat is an open tomb;
With their tongues they have practiced deceit”;
“The poison of asps is under their lips”;
“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
Destruction and misery are in their ways;
And the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for

by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:9-23)

That passage doesn't just describe the really bad people in the world. It describes all of us, because compared to God, we're all really bad. We are all wicked sinners in need of a Savior. Salvation, at first, is recognizing this reality about yourself. If you're active in church but you think you're a pretty good person, you should be greatly concerned about the state of your soul. Salvation begins with an individual realizing that he or she is not a good person at all.

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' " (Matthew 7:21-23)

This sad quote from Jesus is referring to people who are active in the church and have called Jesus "Lord" yet they have never actually experienced salvation. Take time here to truly, honestly examine your heart and your life. Is Jesus talking about you?

The other key aspect of salvation is that there must be ongoing evidence. Salvation is not merely an emotional experience that you can have, then you go back to living your life the same way you always have. There is one verse in particular (Romans 10:13) that is often misused and quoted out of context as part of the so-called "Romans Road" to salvation. Unfortunately, that and other similar methods mislead people into thinking that salvation is nothing more than calling out to Jesus in an emotional moment and then getting on with life.

For "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:21)

At first glance, these two verses appear to contradict one another. But the Bible cannot contradict itself if the entire Bible is the Word of God, which it proves itself to be. There appears to be a contradiction only because Romans 10:13 is often taken out of context. That portion of the book of Romans is explaining how salvation is available to everyone, not just the Jews. Taking that verse out of context is extremely dangerous, because it is often used to give people a false assurance that they have something they don't actually have (true salvation).

As Jesus plainly says, though, simply calling out to the Lord is no guarantee of salvation. Instead, there must be evidence. Those who have been saved are not perfect—there will still be struggles with sin. But someone who has truly been saved will possess a new desire to avoid sin and to do things that please God—things that honor Him and bring Him glory.

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes,

that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.” (John 15:1-8)

Someone who has truly been saved through Jesus Christ will bear fruit. That means that such a person will live in a manner pleasing to God, will show love to others, and will enjoy reading the Bible and sharing the good news of salvation with others. Again, salvation does not make anyone perfect in this life. But there will be a clear change in lifestyle and in the desires of the heart. The well-known passage listing the fruit of the Spirit clearly shows this contrast:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:19-25)

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Colossians 3:1-10)

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (1 Peter 2:1-3)

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. (1 John 2:3-6)

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:5-10)

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (James 2:19-20)

Many people believe there is a God. Even the demons believe that. But salvation is much more than just acknowledging that God exists. If you have experienced true salvation, true saving faith through Jesus Christ, there will be evidence in your life to show that. When Zacchaeus was saved, he immediately had a change of heart and went out to right the wrongs that he had committed. This question is so important: Has God truly changed your heart?

Another misconception about salvation is that God is begging us to come to Him. But God is not a weak and feeble beggar; in fact, that could not be further from the truth. The verse quoted below from the book of Revelation is another verse that is frequently taken out of context. That verse is contained within a letter, written to believers within a certain church, and it has absolutely nothing to do with salvation. In the passage quoted below from Luke, though, Jesus is clearly talking about salvation.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. (Revelation 3:20)

"Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from...'" (Luke 13:24-25)

God is not standing at the door, knocking and begging for people to let Him in. God is fully in control of when the door opens and when it closes. We must come to His door as beggars. God does not owe us anything. Imagine a rich man who randomly gives money to ten people. We wouldn't condemn him for not giving money to everyone; we would celebrate his generosity. Similarly, God must be praised for saving any of us at all, because none of us has done anything to deserve salvation. This requires a change from our usual way of thinking.

"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are

commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' ” (Luke 17:7-10)

God does not need us, and we add nothing at all to Him. That is what it means to be an “unprofitable servant,” which is all any true Christian is according to Jesus in this parable. Even if we do all that we should do as followers of Christ, we are still unprofitable servants, because God is already perfect and complete. It is impossible for any of us to add anything to God or do anything that helps or improves Him. When we have the proper perspective of our standing before God, the proper question to ask is this: Why, then, does God save anyone at all?

5. We misunderstand the purpose of salvation.

“For My name’s sake I will defer My anger, and for My praise I will restrain it from you, so that I do not cut you off. behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, I will do it; for how should My name be profaned? And I will not give My glory to another.” (Isaiah 48:9-11)

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. ... I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. ... Not for your sake do I do this,” says the Lord God, “let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your own ways, O house of Israel!” ’ ” (Ezekiel 36:22, 27, 32)

He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. ... For Your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is great. ... Nevertheless He saved them for His name’s sake, that He might make His mighty power known. (Psalm 23:3; 25:11; 106:8)

Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; and deliver us, and provide atonement for our sins, for Your name’s sake! (Psalm 79:9)

“I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins.” (Isaiah 43:25)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Christians are not saved because of anything good in us, nor because any sinful human can add anything to the Almighty God. Those who have received salvation are saved for the sake of God’s great name, so that we might see and understand His great love, mercy, grace, and righteousness. And this is also a further purpose of the law: We cannot obey the law to be saved, but anyone who has received God’s amazing gift of salvation will want to obey the law in order to honor and glorify God. When Christians act and talk differently than those around them, people notice the difference and God is glorified.

For the Lord will not forsake His people, for His great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you His people. Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you. (1 Sam. 12:22-24)

You have delivered me from the strivings of the people; You have made me the head of the nations; a people I have not known shall serve me. (Psalm 18:43)

You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written. (Romans 2:23-24)

But I say, did Israel not know? First Moses says: "I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will move you to anger by a foolish nation." But Isaiah is very bold and says: "I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me." (Romans 10:19-20)

God promised Abraham on several occasions that salvation would come to all nations. But in Old Testament times, God primarily saved Israelites (Jews), though there were some exceptions such as Ruth, Rahab, and the people of Nineveh. Sadly, the Israelites continually disobeyed the God who did so much for them. They worshipped false idols instead of the one true God while also mistakenly believing that they could earn salvation by obeying the law. So God, who always keeps His promises, did just as He said He would do in order to provoke the Jews, his original chosen people group, to jealousy. After the resurrection of Jesus, He began to send messengers to bring the good news of the gospel to all the people of the world.

Although God now sends messengers to preach the gospel to all nations as a consequence for the lack of faith among the Jews, He only saves anyone at all in order to bring glory to Himself. That may sound selfish if we fail to properly understand God, but as sole creator and sustainer of the universe, He alone deserves all honor and glory.

Obedying God's law cannot save us. The law shows us our sin and our need of a Savior. Once someone has been saved, obedience to the law honors God and shows the world that a dramatic change has taken place, that there is now something different inside. In addition, perhaps some people who notice the difference will want to get to know God themselves.

This is, in fact, the significant difference between Christianity and all other religions in the world. All other religions teach some variation of works-righteousness. In some religions, people must do something in order to earn God's favor and a place in heaven. In others, people must do something in order to attain a higher level of consciousness. But the common thread among all other religions is that we must do something in order to gain something.

Christianity is the only religion that is different, because the Bible teaches that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation. All other religions are the results of people's attempts to reach God or to reach a higher state of being. On the other hand, in Christianity we find God reaching down to us and sending a Savior, because there is no way we can earn His favor on our own. Everyone who fails to realize that follows either some kind of false religion or no organized religion at all.

When we rightly understand salvation, we realize how all the glory belongs to God. That is not only true of salvation, but everything in this life should direct our focus toward God. When we fail to realize that, we miss out on understanding God as well as we could.

Take marriage as an example. Marriage, a sacred institution that is under vicious attack, is not ultimately for our happiness but was ultimately instituted by God to give us a picture of the relationship between Christ, the bridegroom, and His church, the bride.

Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ... Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." (Revelation 21:2, 9)

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Ephesians 5:22-33)

This passage from Ephesians is often used to give advice to married couples, and indeed it is very useful for that purpose. We learn a lot about the roles of husbands and wives when we carefully read this passage. But it goes deeper than that, when we stop to consider the great mystery to which Paul is referring.

The ultimate purpose of marriage is to help us better understand the relationship between Christ and His church, and to be an example of the relationship between Christ and His church to the world around us. Yes, we can find daily happiness within marriage as well, which is a gracious blessing from God. But we miss out on its ultimate meaning and purpose if we fail to understand these things.

Understanding the ultimate purpose of marriage as an example of how Christ loves and cares for His church also helps us to understand why divorce is such a big deal to God. God chose certain people to whom He saves and gives love, even though we do not deserve to receive His love. Within a marriage, love is also a choice that is intended to last a lifetime, not a feeling that may only be temporary. Divorce does not accurately exemplify the relationship between Christ and His church, since the love of God never changes.

For those reasons, marriage is an example of what God does during and after salvation, and specifically of the relationship between Christ and His church. Within a marriage, children also give us a picture of different aspects of salvation. For example, raising children can help us better understand how God chastens and corrects His children in order to make us more like Christ, and twins can help us better understand how God works in salvation.

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:5-11)

And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth." Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. (Romans 9:10-18)

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?" But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? (Romans 9:19-24)

Any good father chastens his children out of love, so we should expect no less out of our Heavenly Father, who is far superior to any earthly father. Anyone who does not receive chastening from God should seriously question his or her salvation. Some of these truths are hard for us to accept. But if God has said it in Scripture, it is true, and we are not at liberty to ignore it. That is also the case with the doctrine of election, which is explained very clearly in Romans 9 and exemplified in the twin brothers of Jacob and Esau.

We can be thankful that God has given us institutions like marriage and responsibilities like raising children not only for their obvious rewards in this life, but also so that we might better understand Him, salvation, His Son, and His purposes. This is also the ultimate purpose of prayer—not merely to ask for things, but to help us know God better and to help make us more like Him.

6. We misunderstand the purpose of prayer and church.

In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)

Just like salvation and other things God has given to us in this world such as marriage, prayer should also be all about glorifying God. That is what we find in the model prayer that Jesus gave us as an example to follow. Like this prayer, our prayer should not be focused on asking for things. It is okay to make requests in prayer; indeed, we are told to do that on many occasions in the Bible, but that should not be our primary focus. Instead, our focus in prayer should be on praising God, praying for His will to be done, and praying for spiritual strength, such as our personal deliverance from sin and evil. By praying in that manner, prayer conforms us more to the image of Christ, draws us closer to God, and helps us better understand God.

Similarly, church should also be all about bringing God glory and about knowing Him better. Church should not be focused on our feelings or interests. Unfortunately, that is exactly what many churches choose to do—worship services focus on our feelings or on getting us excited, while activities are planned to cater to people’s interests. Conducting such activities and events is not necessarily a bad thing, but creating exciting activities without a proper focus on God should not be a church’s priority. Instead, the corporate worship of God by a group of sincere followers of Christ should be the primary focus of a church.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:23-24)

Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. (Psalm 29:2)

...the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created." (Revelation 4:10-11)

Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. (Hebrews 9:1)

*Oh come, let us sing to the Lord!
Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.
Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;
Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.
For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture,
And the sheep of His hand. (Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7)*

Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. (Ephesians 5:17-21)

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

Those passages do not tell us exactly how a church service should operate, but they do give us a good idea of some things we should do as well as the perspective we should have. However a specific worship service is conducted, the key is that worshipping God is a sacred thing. Churches whose primary activities are fun, exciting, or silly are sorely misguided and sadly lack the reverence that should be a key component of worship.

Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for one-fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the Lord their God. (Nehemiah 9:2-3)

A significant portion of their worship was dedicated to reading the Book of the Law, which we know as part of the Old Testament. Similarly, in our modern churches, reading and preaching from the Word of God should be the focus of worship—not an afterthought, nor something we should be hoping to get through quickly. Hearing from the Word of God should be the most important aspect of a church service.

Reading and preaching from the Bible are essential and vitally important for all people. For any unbelievers who are in the service, it may be the only time they hear God's Word proclaimed. For false converts who are in the service (those who think they are saved but who actually are not, and nearly every modern-day church gathering includes some of these people), it is their opportunity to hear the truth and realize that something is missing in their hearts. For those who are true believers, it is an opportunity to be reminded of all the wonderful blessings God has given us (both eternal blessings and temporal blessings), how amazing God is, and how we need to live each day in order to honor and glorify Him.

Within the preaching, the pastor should be preaching from the Word of God. In his preaching, does your pastor focus on this life or on eternal life? Does he focus on teaching moral lessons or on proclaiming Jesus Christ? Preaching is not intended to be a pep talk, a motivational speech, or a moral lesson. Preaching is about proclaiming the truth of God's Word. There are many things contained within the pages of the Bible that unsaved people do not like to hear. But Jesus did not shy away from such topics, and neither should we.

If unsaved people within a church service enjoy a pastor's preaching, that pastor is most likely not proclaiming God's Word as intensely as he should. Good, faithful preaching should be unsettling to unbelievers and believers alike. Unbelievers should be convicted of their sin and their need to repent, while believers should be reminded to be thankful for what God has done and all that He continues to do each and every day.

These different types of people can often be found within the same church building, and sometimes that leads to conflicts. The Bible also gives us wisdom on how to handle such people, and even how to handle disagreements with fellow Christians.

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Philippians 3:17)

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. (Romans 16:17)

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?

No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

Whether between believers, unbelievers, or a mixture of both, arguments within a church come directly from Satan and serve absolutely no purpose if our intention is, as it should be, to glorify God in all that we do. In the first two verses quoted above, Paul urges us to follow the example of fellow believers while avoiding those who live and treat others in such a way that shows that they are obviously unbelievers, even if they go to church.

Done properly, church should encourage, exhort, and edify believers, while also proclaiming the good news of salvation to the lost. Worship services, preaching, prayer meetings, and any other activities should have those end goals in mind. Occasional fun church events are not necessarily sinful and, in fact, can be beneficial for strengthening the bonds of fellowship. However, if people can't tell the difference between your church and a community center or a country club, and if the pastor's preaching is enjoyed by both the saved and the lost, then your church is not glorifying God as it should.

Believers should also be exhorted to continue to live each day in obedience to God, sharing His truth with others around us and living above reproach in a way that brings Him honor and glory. In order to do that, and in order for all of us to know God better, pastors need to preach God's Word faithfully and all believers need to read God's Word regularly.

7. We misunderstand what the Bible is all about.

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. ... Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." (Luke 24:27, 44)

Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened. Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. Then I said, "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart." (Psalm 40:7-8)

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.'" (Hebrews 10:5-7)

The Bible is all about Jesus—not just the New Testament, but all of it, from Genesis to Revelation. After the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, God slowly, progressively revealed His plan of redemption throughout the Old Testament, then fulfilled His plan in the New Testament.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you desired of the Lord your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.’ And the Lord said to me: ‘What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.’ ” (Deuteronomy 18:15-18)

And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, “Are You for us or for our adversaries?” So He said, “No, but as Commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and said to Him, “What does my Lord say to His servant?” Then the Commander of the Lord’s army said to Joshua, “Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy.” And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5:13-15)

“I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate. Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am understanding, I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all the judges of the earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me.” (Proverbs 8:12-17)

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

This is just a very small collection of the many, many passages in the Old Testament that refer to the coming Savior. In some of those passages, we read about Him; in others, He actually appears, as He did to Joshua.

The Old Testament is not merely a collection of stories and laws. Those things are in the Old Testament to point us toward our Savior and our need of salvation. The Old Testament is full of laws, but their purpose is not to show us how we can earn a place in heaven. The Old Testament law serves a threefold purpose.

First, when Israel was its own nation back in that day, God gave them certain laws in order to set them apart from all the other people of the world, to show the world that they were different, and thereby to bring God glory. Second, the law serves the ultimate purpose of showing us that we are unable to obey it, so that we recognize our sinfulness and our need of a Savior. Third, the true Christian, who has been born again and demonstrated repentance from sin, is given a desire from God to want to obey His law so that, just as in Old Testament Israel, the world will see that a Christian is different from the world, and God is glorified.

Unfortunately, many people misuse the Bible. For the reasons just given, the Bible is not a book of laws that we must follow rigidly in order to earn favor with God. It is also not a book of moral lessons to help us lead better lives. As explained above, a true Christian will desire to live in a way that is pleasing to God. But simply living morally and trying to do the right thing does not earn God's favor in any way. As the Bible says, even the things we do that we think are good are actually filthy in God's sight, if we do them apart from faith in Christ.

You are indeed angry, for we have sinned—in these ways we continue; and we need to be saved. But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. (Isaiah 64:5b-6)

Yes, Jesus was a good teacher. But that's not all He was; most importantly, He is Lord and Savior. Simply trying to help the needy and do kind things for people, if you lack repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, does absolutely nothing to earn God's favor. If you think the Bible is merely a collection of good moral teachings and interesting stories, you have sadly missed the entire point of the Bible.

The Bible is also misused when verses are taken out of context and twisted to suit someone's agenda. "Judge not, that you be not judged," a quote from Jesus, is perhaps the most frequently misused verse in the entire Bible. We must be careful not to take out little portions of Scripture and use them to suit our needs. Instead, each verse must be read and understood in context so that we truly understand what is being said and apply the teaching properly. Let us now read the verse about judging in context and also compare it with another quote from Jesus.

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5)

"Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." (John 7:24)

Christians are told to judge to be sure that others who call themselves Christians are bearing fruit and living in a way that honors God, but we must not judge hypocritically. That is what Jesus taught. This is just one example of how important it is to read Scripture in context. When we fail to do that, we take the risk of misusing God's Holy Word.

But is the Bible really holy, inspired by God, and completely true? How can we know for sure? Logically, it is interesting that the Bible begins by simply declaring God, not attempting to prove that He exists. Since no one is greater than God, there is no other authority to which one could appeal to prove His existence. Even so, we have the whole creation around us that does prove the existence of God.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:20-21)

Many people are misled into believing the illogical and baseless theory of evolution, but for those who keep an open mind, the evidence of God's creation is abundantly clear for all to see. In addition, there are numerous prophecies throughout the Bible that have been fulfilled. The book of Isaiah, for example, contains many prophecies about the coming Messiah that were fulfilled more than 700 years later by Jesus Christ. Such fulfillment of prophecy would have been virtually impossible if Jesus was not actually the Son of God.

Skeptics may claim that someone just made up fictional stories so it would appear that prophecies had been fulfilled, but the Bible has so much historical evidence that such a thing could not have happened. Besides that, the entire text of the Bible took some 1500 years to complete and was written by about 40 different people, yet the entire Bible has one common theme—redemption through Jesus Christ. It would be impossible for mere humans to write such a book. But it is certainly possible with God.

The Bible is an amazing book, given to us by God, and within its pages we find the gradual revelation of His story—the redemption and salvation of mankind from the sin that we brought on ourselves. That is what the Bible is all about. That theme should also be the focus of church, so that we may rightly understand salvation, Jesus Christ, and God Himself.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself these questions. Do I recognize how holy God is, and how different we are from Him? Do I rightly understand who Jesus is and what His priorities were while He walked on this earth? Do I properly understand what true salvation looks like and why God saves people? Do I understand the primary purpose of church and other things in this life? Do I have a correct understanding of what the Bible is all about?

Properly understanding the holiness of God, the work of Jesus Christ, and your sinful condition are essential for a Christian and for a church, so that God's truth will spread and God will be glorified. It is my hope and prayer that God will use the thoughts and Scripture passages presented in this brief booklet to help bring more people to a proper understanding of those vitally important truths. May God be glorified in this and in all things.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. (2 Timothy 2:15-16)

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

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