

The Basics: A Readable Review of Christian Faith

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Lacon, Illinois



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Introduction

Christianity is at times like moldy cheese. Given the right conditions cheese will mold over. Sometimes this is on purpose since the mold imparts strong flavors. Often this moldy condition is accidental, undesired, and unappealing to the point of throwing the cheese away. But, shave away the mold and the cheese underneath is still perfectly good. Over time, religious mold can creep into our new life in Jesus. The purpose of our next Lambchow series is to scrape away the mold and return to the basics of Christian faith.

We'll cover these basics in a form similar to systematic theology. Don't let that term scare you away. This is not a textbook or a multivolume Magnus Opus with technical terminology that strains at every jot and tittle. Call this instead applied theology which covers the basic understandings of the Christian faith and how they impact our lives. When this journey visits the attributes of God and humankind, an overview of the Bible, explored Jesus, salvation, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the church.

Our approach will be to discover revealed truths instead of undertaking a "prove it to me" approach. The basic assumptions for this journey are that God is and God reveals. Who is God? What is God like? What has God shown us about these topics and Himself? How has this revelation been given? Those are the questions which will begin our journey.

Why do this? Two observations collided to propel this project. The first is the increasing loss of basic Bible literacy in the western world. Terms and stories commonplace to faith in Christ are no longer generally understood or known. Even simple ideas such as sin are increasingly becoming covered by the mold of apathy, individualism, and consumerism. The second issue is the lack of accessible, understandable, and applicable works of this kind. There are plenty of published theologies which are either expensive to purchase, difficult to understand unless college trained in theology, and they generally don't touch how this knowledge affects our lives.

No theology, however, can be totally free of bias or slant. This work will approach these grand themes from an evangelical perspective with Mennonite/Anabaptist roots and Vineyard/Wimber limbs. I am not, however, anti-others. I am pro-God and actively seek the radical middle found the lively tension between the various pillars of historic Christianity.

For some, this will be like drinking milk instead of eating strong meat. What I'm asking of those readers is harder than they may imagine. My encouragement to those mature ones is to take the risk of scraping away the mold of churchiness and Christian identity to rediscover the true depths of our faith.

For others, this will be like exploring a newly discovered continent filled with mystery. The adventure of discovery may generate even more questions. Hang in there, it may be a long process, but it will be well worth the effort.

The hope is that all will discover or rediscover the basic revealed truths of Christianity in a way that is accessible, understandable and applicable.

Dale Heinold

Chapter One – God

All Powerful

One thing we learn in life is that there is always someone or something more powerful than ourselves. No matter how high we climb on the ladder of success and power we are still limited. Even the President of the United States, as powerful as that office is, is limited by the Constitution, the law, and the power of the vote. And yet, the first aspect of God we are considering is his all-powerfulness also called omnipotence.

Consider the power revealed in creation, an event we'll cover in more depth later on. The Bible says, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light."* (Genesis 1:1–3, NASB95) And from the Gospel of John, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being."* (John 1:1–3, NASB95)

With just a word something came from nothing - that's power. The prophet Jeremiah summarized this power by saying, *"Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You,"* (Jeremiah 32:17, NASB95) But God's power is not the raw force of fire marching across a parched forest. It is constrained by God's other attributes. So, while God is all-powerful, He is also self-limiting.

One such self-limiting example is that God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18, Numbers 23:19). Other aspects of His being also bring structure to this might. Perhaps the greatest self-limiting factor is found in His love. So, while God is all-powerful and could do anything at any time in ways far beyond our wildest imagination the implementation of that power is perfected by God's other attributes.

While not a perfect example, consider the power a parent has over an infant. A parent has the raw power to do anything they want to that infant. But that power is tempered by love and compassion even when the infant cries all night.

To be frank, God's power confuses us. If God was all-powerful why did this happen? Why didn't God step in and prevent this disaster? Why didn't God stop the bad things that happened to me? We see those things and wonder if God really is as all-powerful and loving as the Bible says. Perhaps this confusion has brought you to the point of denying God's existence. But recall the infant. Does the baby know or understand why they need their diaper changed? Or Why they need to take a bath? Or why they need

that shot which stings so much? Neither can we explain why God does or doesn't do things.

Nothing is too difficult for God. God is all-powerful, nothing and no one is more powerful. That's important to remember when we're faced with powerful foes and impossible odds. When the valley we're in is deep and dark or there's an sea of "no way" before us. But God's perfect power is deployed according to His other attributes which we have yet to uncover. So, while we may want an immediate take no prisoners resolution to our problems, which God could do, He may choose a different but more fruitful path. One question remains, will we trust and have faith in God even if we don't yet understand the ways or why's of His power.

All Knowing

How much do you know? It's actually a difficult answer to answer. We may think we know a lot but in reality when we compare it to the entirety of human knowledge our sliver of the pie would be minuscule. If we narrow this by limiting ourselves to a category like cars, cooking, accounting, medicine, or science the sliver of our knowledge may grow. But unless the scope is extremely narrow no one can ever say they know everything. The Bible says however that God does know everything, including everything about us.

Consider the Psalmist's poetic words, *"He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them. Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite."* (Psalm 147:4–5, NASB95) And *"O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways."* (Psalm 139:1–3, NASB95)

Jesus also related God's knowledge to something personal, *"Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered."* (Matthew 10:29–30, NASB95)

The Bible tells us through these and other passages that God knows everything about everything. For the sake of space let's narrow this down a bit. He knows everything there is to know about each one of us. He sees our day, knows our thoughts, nothing escapes his notice. It's actually difficult to fathom that God knows that right now I'm writing these words while sipping coffee and that in another time and place you're reading them. But he does.

Not only does God know about our now and our past but he also knows our future. Here we can get into a theological mess arguing if God predestines our path or simply knows it's possibilities. I prefer to think that because of free-will God knows the outcome of every decision I could possibly make. But somehow all who choose Jesus are also predestined by God to do so. Put it this way, God chose us before we were and we chose Him in that moment of decision.

That swampy conflict between predestination and free-will tells us something about the all-knowingness of God. In the same way that God self-limits his power, God self-limits his knowledge. Not in the sense of refusing to know something but in the sense of doing something about it. God predestines us but doesn't force us into it. The use of his perfect knowledge is limited by his love for each one of us.

He lets us make stupid, wrong, and perhaps even sinful choices even though He knows we'll choose that path before we do. He knows the sin of others that will offend and wound us and the terrible things done by people, nature, and happenstance. God knows we'll stub our toe.

Some consider these two attributes of God and scoff at God's seeming impotency. If God is all powerful and all knowing then why doesn't he intervene and stop all the suffering in the world? Would the world be better off or would it be nothing but a loveless place without free will? God's perfect and complete knowledge is tempered by love. Not the fake love of a tyrant. Nor the twistedness of controlling love. But a gracious love that is freely given with a desire for love to be freely returned. God does know everything, even how to best love you and me.

All-Present

How often would you like to be in two places at once? We all face that conflict, those times when the various spheres of our worlds collide. When work calls, a birthday party is happening, and our child is playing a football/soccer game -- all at the same time! It's in those times we wish we could be in two or even three places at once. An impossible wish for us, but not for God. Another aspect of God's revealed character is His being everywhere at once, also called omnipresence.

The prophet Jeremiah recorded, *"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? "Can a man hide himself in hiding places So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD."* (Jeremiah 23:23–24, NASB95) And the Psalmist wrote, *"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest*

part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me.” (Psalm 139:7–10, NASB95) Where can I go from God’s Spirit that He isn’t there? Nowhere.

This revelation of God’s everywhere-ness is so contrary to our human experience it is difficult for us to grasp. We often talk of God as if He is a distant cousin living in a far-off country. That God is “up there.” Or only in certain places at certain times like the sanctuary of a church building on Sunday morning. We may even think that God is in the nicer places but stays away from the dark, rough, and ugly places. Even in the deepest darkest pit of sin and despair, God is there.

The two previous attributes of God, His all-powerfulness and all-knowing had a revealed element of self-limitation. Not so with God’s everywhere-ness. From the space between the nuclei of an atom to the farthest reaches of the stars, God is there. In our darkest moments and our highest celebrations, God is there.

But here we must also be careful lest we worship creation and not the creator. While God is in the tree, the tree is not to be worshiped as God. Neither the stars, or the sea, or the mountains, or other people are to be worshiped even though God is in all of those.

We often think that someone is too far gone for God to reach. Perhaps we’ve even thought that about ourselves. But that is not so. God is there right now.

Or perhaps we’ve assumed God can’t see our secrets, but He can. A very young child is often mystified by a parent’s disappearance behind a blanket. Out of sight means the parent is gone. They can’t yet process that the parent is simply on the other side of the blanket. We do the same thing with God, doing things and thinking things in secret we assume no one can see - not even God. But God does see.

The flip-side of that truth is that God is also there wherever and whenever we want to talk to Him. We don’t need to run to a special place or wait for an appointed time. God is always right there right now. When the car breaks down in the middle of nowhere - God is there. When we’re distressed and worried in the middle of the night - God is there. He’s there when something goes wrong at work or when our dreams fall apart. God is there when we run the other way or try to escape through various addictions.

No matter where you are or when it is - God is there.

Timeless

Most of us have a love/hate relationship with time. We look forward with longing for certain days to arrive. The promise of Christmas, the day of graduation, the date of our

wedding to name a few. And yet time also seems to be an enemy as we struggle to complete tasks or are bored for lack of something to do. Our basic understanding of time is linear. We move from one moment to the next. In a way, we are trapped at this moment we call now. Yet we also recognize the past and look forward to the future. God's experience with time, however, is far different.

To be honest this is a difficult aspect to wrap our heads around. We have some experience with power, presence, and knowledge. That experience of seeing variations of those attributes in the world around us allows us to consider God's fullness of them. But time seems different, or is it?

Prior to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, we assumed time was fixed. Now we know there is a squishiness due to other factors. For instance. Two people, one on earth and one on a spaceship traveling near the speed of light would each experience the pass of seconds in the same way. But, according to Relativity, when their paths crossed again more time will have passed for the person on earth than the person rocketing through space.

In this attribute of God, there is a constant tension between our limited finite experience of time and God's eternal experience of time. Peter wrote, *"But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day."* (2 Peter 3:8, NASB95) God simply doesn't see time the same way we do.

C. S. Lewis put it this way in Mere Christianity - "If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all."

We experience one moment at a time while God experiences all moments at once. You could rightly say that God is outside of time. He is not bound by its constraints. God is eternal, before time and after time. And yet all of creation is governed in some way by time, such as the cyclical vibrations of light or the steady rotation of the earth around the sun.

To sum up. In God's experience of time, there is no past tense (was) or future tense (will be). For Him, all our "nows" are now. For God, what happened in the past is now and what will happen tomorrow for us is now. Yet while God is outside of time He is also timely and works within our experience of time (past, present, and future).

God is working within the grand sweep of history. He is also working within our own personal history right now. An apt description of God's work is that of a potter spinning a cup, bowl, vase, or pitcher. As we spin through our days God is molding and shaping

each one of us today for our tomorrow. The question is whether we are yielding or rebellious to His touch at this moment we call today.

Holy

Prominently displayed at the National Archives in Washington DC are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. These documents are protected and preserved in special cases. On display for all yet separate and untouchable except by a few using special protocols. They are treated as something unique and precious. To use a much older word, they treated as something holy. But treating something as holy and being holy is not the same thing.

So far we've looked at God's all-powerfulness, all-knowingness, everywhere, and eternalness. Today we are looking at a Biblical term for which there is no common adequate replacement. Holy is an old word that has been used and abused for thousands of years. At its very core, it means separate. But in the Biblical use, it has connotations of purity and otherness. When common implements were created for use in the Temple they were consecrated and set apart - they were declared holy.

But God is not declared holy He is holy. The easiest way to grasp this is to consider God as separate in His otherness. The Bible says, *"There is no one holy like the LORD, Indeed, there is no one besides You, Nor is there any rock like our God."* (1 Samuel 2:2, NASB95) And, *"Exalt the LORD our God And worship at His holy hill, For holy is the LORD our God."* (Psalm 99:9, NASB95) In a way, holy sums up all the attributes of God in one word.

This otherness is so stark that the Bible says it is always being declared. Consider this heavenly scene, *"And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, 'HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.'"* (Revelation 4:8, NASB95) God is holy. Yet, as we've seen in His other attributes, He's not locked away for safe keeping like those documents at the National Archive but He is active and intimately involved with His creation.

Even though God desires to relate with humanity there is a basic conflict between God's holiness and the unholy choices of people. In basic terms, sin is a violation of God's holiness. The Bible says, *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."* (Isaiah 55:8-9, NLT) And yet, the essence of humanity is to go our own way, plot our own course, ascend to a god-like status through our own efforts.

Unlike the treasured documents at the National Archives, God is approachable. The whole point of the Biblical narrative is about bringing people into real life contact and relationship with God. He isn't "up there" in some guarded kingdom waiting for us to get our act together. Or watching with lightning bolts in hand for us to mess up. God invites everyone to connect with Him through Jesus, but that's getting ahead of ourselves. At this point, it is sufficient to say that God, in His holiness and otherness, desires a relationship with His creation.

Love

Everyone has an attribute or two that defines them. An innate quality that is the keystone for their entire life. For human beings, this could be something wonderful or awful, pleasing or repulsive, but it is the one attribute that affects and governs all of the others. For God that one keystone attribute is love.

We often think of love as a fleeting mercurial whimsical feeling. Perhaps that's because we fail to recognize the different kinds of love. For instance, while English has one word for love New Testament era Greek had four. There was "eros", romantic and sensual love. "Storge" is instinctual love between parent and child. "Phileo" is brotherly love between people. And finally, "agape" love is unconditional love.

The Bible strongly connects God with agape. The Apostle John wrote, *"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."* (1 John 4:7-8, NLT) And, *"We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."* (1 John 4:16, NASB95) All of those "love" words are a form of agape.

We must make a large distinction between our love and God's love. No matter which type of love we are expressing it is always in the form of "I love..." Whether it is I love cherry pie or I love you. Basically, we are saying we possess a love for something or someone. God, on the other hand, does not possess love; He is love. It is an inseparable part of His being. That simple revealed fact is key to understanding what we have talked about so far and what is yet to come. God is love - all of love.

In God's other attributes of all-powerfulness, all-knowingness, and otherness we noted observationally a self-limiting factor. That factor is love. God's love is unending and patient. But His love doesn't remove or change those other attributes. There are times, many of which we don't understand, when holiness must rule through justice. Such as when Uzza died after he sought to support the Ark of the Covenant when the oxen

stumbled nearly overturning the cart. (1 Chronicles 13:9-10) It seems unjust and unfair. Where was God's love for Uzza?

In this instance, God's love is Exodus 25:14-15 which specified and provided for the Ark to be carried on poles by men, not hauled in a wagon. If David had followed the course set hundreds of years earlier then

Uzza wouldn't have died. And that is where we encounter a large conflict between God's love and our view of love. In our minds love is often only love if it meets our desires and standards. We may think that since God is love He should be ok if I want to do something contrary to His prior instruction. He should love me no matter what.

Here's the kicker. He does love us no matter what. The problem is that by choosing to go our own way we are loving ourselves and not loving God. When that happens consequences will follow. Not because God failed to love us, but because we chose self-love over loving God. But, as we'll soon see, God's love even provided for our failure to love Him.

God is love. Everything, even those things we don't understand, contains an aspect of His love. We may not see it or understand it but it is always there. God's love is not fleeting, mercurial, whimsical, or earned. God's love is perfect, unfailing, and freely given. In Paul's letter to the Romans he wrote, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39, NASB95) Not only is God love, but God loves you.

One and Trinity

A look across the many religions of mankind reveals some stark similarities and differences. For some god is a force of nature. Others worship many gods, each with their own strengths, weaknesses, and responsibilities. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims there is a singular god. The similarity across all of these is the human desire to connect with something or someone larger than ourselves. The difference is one of personhood and completeness.

The Bible clearly declares God as one and not many. *"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"* (Deuteronomy 6:4, NASB95) This declaration sets God apart from the crowd of gods found in ancient Egypt and surrounding territories. God is one, He is all and complete in himself as we've seen in His attributes.

The Bible also pictures God as personable and not a raw force to be tamed. Throughout the Biblical narrative, God speaks with human individuals. From Adam to Abraham to Moses, Job, David, and the prophets. Sometimes God communicated directly, sometimes through messengers, visions, or other means.

But God reveals more. That more is the mystery of the what Christ-followers call the Trinity. One God with three distinct persons in perfect unity. Christians identify the three as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One passage revealing this Trinity is the scene of Jesus' baptism. Matthew records, "*After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'*" (Matthew 3:16–17, NASB95)

There have been many attempts to understand or explain this mystery of the Trinity. Water observationally has three distinct forms, ice, liquid, and steam. An egg has three components, shell, white, and yolk. A person can be different things at the same time. For instance, father, son, and husband. Yet all of these fall far short of God's reality.

The Trinity is not so much something to understand in our terms but a mystery to embrace. God is one yet also three co-equal distinct persons in perfect unity. To go beyond that basic understanding and apply any number of formulas quickly becomes problematic. The basic truth is that we only glimpse the edges of this mystery, we can see it but not fully grasp it.

Yet, the mystery of the Trinity does reveal an important attribute of God. Both internal to the Trinity and towards humans God is personable and sociable. God is not revealed as a person-less force to be controlled or a collection of demi-gods to be appeased, but as an all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, infinite, holy, timeless, loving person to love and trust in return.

Perhaps the greatest mystery isn't the Trinity but that God would invite all women and men to enter into that unity through Jesus. A mystery we will continue to unfold as we continue our review of the basics of Christian faith.

Creator

The Bible begins with this revelation of God, "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" (Genesis 1:1, NASB95) To explore this attribute of God we won't delve too far into the various understandings of time and method but stick to the primary basic truth that everything we see and can discover was created by God.

Creation itself is God's first revelation of himself. The Apostle Paul observed, *"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made..."* (Romans 1:20, NASB95) God's handiwork is seen in the power of ocean waves; the majesty of snow-capped mountains; the laughter of a babbling brook; the tenacity, variety, and fragility of life; the songs of birds, whales, and humans; the painter's brush colors of the sunrise and sunset; the uniqueness of each snow-flake; in the smallest part of the atom to the furthest stretch of space; and the miracle of birth - to suggest just a few.

The Bible tells us in Genesis and in John 1:1-5 that all of creation was spoken into existence. For instance, Genesis says, *"The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day."* (Genesis 1:2-5, NASB95) God said -- and it was -- and it was good.

But some may have a problem with the creation account. The hyper-literal stance using the genealogy lists found in the Bible calculates that the earth is under 10,000 years old. This seems at odds with basic science and common sense. On the other hand, if we fully drink the account proposed by science we risk losing faith in God and becoming lost in meaninglessness. Whether the Bible's account of creation is literal or not is actually a question no one can answer except God.

For me personally, the timing of creation is not something I argue or divide over. Consider this - Could God had made the entirety of the universe, as it exists right now in an instant? Yes. The important part is that God created the basis for everything we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Humankind may mold those elements into wonderful, useful, or destructive things but only God can create something out of nothing.

God created - that is the important point upon which faith rests. Atoms, earth, galaxies, humans and so much more are all the work of God's hand. Like all artisans and craftsmen, God reveals himself in his works. In creation, we see and experience all of God's attributes. We glimpse his all-powerfulness that creates with just a word. We marvel at his everywhere-ness. We sense his timelessness in the distances of space. We experience His love even though we may not recognize it. Our conscience itself is a reflection of His holiness.

The final book of the Bible also touches on creation. In the often mysterious visions of Revelation is a picture of God's presence in heaven. Among the worship of God by angels and elders is this declaration, *"Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created."* (Revelation 4:11, NASB95) Having faith that God is and that

God created all things, including you and I, is the first step of a journey filled with marvel.

Chapter Two – Humanity

Humanity is like a complicated and contradictory riddle. Humans can be kind, gentle, loving, and self-sacrificing one moment but spiteful, destructive, hateful, and self-centered the next. We among all the creatures of earth possess history, creative arts, and never-ending ambition. And growing on those basic tools we've created the means to destroy each other hundreds of times over. A gloriously twisted riddle we will unfold in this section of The Basics.

The Bible says this about the creation of humanity - *“Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”* (Genesis 1:26–27, NASB95) In this account, God reveals humanity's form and its purpose.

Humanity, both male and female, are created in the image and likeness of God. We are like God but not god. He is infinite, we are finite and limited. He is all-powerful, but we are not. He is everywhere while we exist in one place at one time. Yet, inside humanity is a drive to rule and mold the world around us. A drive to build cities, dams rivers, create art, and plant gardens. We have the capacity to choose love, act compassionately, and show mercy in ways seldom seen in the animal kingdom. All of these modeling God in some way.

The Bible also reveals something else about the creation of humanity. The second creation account in Genesis chapter two says in part, *“Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”* (Genesis 2:7, NASB95) God's breath of life was more than just pushing air into the lungs. With that breath, the first human became a living soul. The Bible also says, *“Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:11, NLT) That ability to see beyond, to perceive time, to plan for the future, and to yearn for something greater is, in part, what it means to be a living soul.

We must be careful not to pour more than the intended meaning into the creation accounts. The important part is that God created humanity, both male and female, in His image and likeness. Events will occur later that will mar this image of completeness and introduce strife not found in these first days of creation.

At the conclusion of the creation account, the Bible says, *“God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”* (Genesis 1:31a, NASB95) This stamp of approval included humanity. This goodness is the first thread of humanity’s riddle. Even non-Christian philosophers have seen the inherent goodness in humanity. Some have called it a “divine spark” and others “our better angels.” The point is that no matter how flawed and broken someone is they are created in the likeness of God.

It is possible and tempting to spin off into all kinds of “but what about” conflicts and controversies. But we, at this point, only hold two pieces of the riddle. On one hand, God created humanity in His likeness and called it “very good.” On the other is our life experience which reveals a far more dark and complex picture.

There is, however, one item to consider. God didn’t make two humans, He has made them all. Including you and me. The poetry of the Psalms contains these lines. *“You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it.”* (Psalm 139:13–14, NLT) Even though we are far removed from that first man and woman we too are created in the image and likeness of God.

Complete Humanity

In each person, there are several tightly connected pieces. Our bodies are wonderful in their design. We are an adaptable and resilient complex web of cells, organs, bone, and blood. But we are more than just the mechanical and chemical pieces of the human body. We also have emotions, feelings, imagination, personality, and self-awareness. Through these, we exercise love, hate, desires, anger, compassion, justice, mercy, hope, fear, warmth, and grief (to name just a few).

The Bible identifies that each person has three primary components, body, soul, and spirit. For instance, *“Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes*

again.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23, NLT) But the Bible also recognizes that the soul and spirit are so tightly bound together they are difficult to separate. *“For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.”* (Hebrews 4:12, NLT)

We can break all the pieces down this way. Our body is the physical part we see in the mirror. Our soul is a complex stew of emotion, personality, mind, memory, and imagination. Our spirit is the mysterious part connecting us with God. Our conscience is there along with a yearning for wholeness and eternity. That nearly indivisible combination of soul and spirit is often called our heart; not the blood pump but the central core of our being.

In many ways, the complex unity of body, soul, and spirit is like the unity of the Trinity. We are only whole when all three are present and active. Some philosophers have proposed that our existence as purely spiritual. As in the formula of “we are a spirit, have a soul, and live in a body.” A formula not found in the Bible.* We are a God created whole, when one of the three is deadened or wounded we are less than God created us to be.

I know that may be a controversial statement. Let me explain just a bit more. The modern usage of “we are a soul and have a body” (Soul being their amalgam of what we call soul and spirit.) goes back to the spiritualism of the mid to late 1800’s and finds its footing in Gnosticism and Plato. It entered into modern Christian vocabulary as an attempt to correct materialism and find common ground with the prevailing spiritualism of the age. To understand spiritualism think seances and ghost stories. Prior to that point, the more common Christian teaching was “we are a body with a soul.” But salvation in Christ is a whole person experience. Our spirits are made new, our minds are transformed, we find purpose in living (just to name a few). In Christ, we are saved body, soul, and spirit. One day our present body will die but the promise of eternity with Christ is as a completed whole. *“It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed.”* (1 Corinthians 15:52, NLT)

In order for this section to be more complete, we must look ahead a bit. As we’ll discover in our next entry of The Basics that wrong choices separated humankind from God. We became disconnected and deadened from God like the numbness and

dysfunction following nerve damage. The pinnacle of the Biblical narrative is God providing a way for us to become reconnected with Him and find abundant, eternal, full and satisfying life.

How humanity went from the darling of creation to being dead and dying to be offered a new life is the grand arc of the Biblical narrative. Within that arc, God's promises are always towards completeness, wholeness, and healing. This abundant new life we encounter touches everything, our desires, our hopes, our mind, our imagination, our heart, our motivations, and our choices. Later in our exploration of the basics, we'll look deeply into this renewal called salvation. At this point, it is sufficient to understand that God created us as a complex whole of body, soul, and spirit. How that whole became broken is the next entry in our review of the basics.

Humanity's Flaw

It doesn't take long to observe that something's wrong with humanity. Somehow, it simply isn't living up to the promise of being created in God's likeness. Yes, there are flashes of brilliance, creativity, and compassion. Art that stirs the soul, music that moves the feet, acts of generosity and moments of self-sacrifice are clearly evident. But there are also depths of depravity, pain, greed, and the taking of lives which scar any likeness to God. Human history is filled with these heights and depths, sometimes even within the same person.

God designed men and women with the capacity to love, to work, and to make choices. The Bible tells us in Genesis that God planted a garden called Eden for the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, to live and work in. They knew no shame, no fear, and no pain. God gave them one rule. "Don't eat from the tree in the center of the garden, The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If you do will die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

The Bible records what happened next. *"The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?" "Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.' " "You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be*

like God, knowing both good and evil.” The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.” (Genesis 3:1–7, NLT) One quick note: Eve often gets the blame for listening to the serpent, but Adam was right there with her and didn’t say a word. Both failed at that crucial point.

God could have designed humanity without the ability to choose. A robot that perfectly obeys every command. But He didn’t. God instead created humanity with the capacity to love and to choose.

That moment when Adam and Eve choose to go their own way instead of God’s way is the first human sin. From then on all of Adam and Eve’s offspring and descendants are bent and tainted towards sin. Jesus likened sin’s hold over humanity as slavery in John 8:34, NASB95 *“Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”* Death, struggle, conflict, and separation flowed to all. What should be unthinkable became normal.

We may think that God is unjust by condemning all of Adam and Eve’s offspring to suffer the punishment of their sin. But the Bible recognizes that while sin began in the garden each person is guilty because of their own sin. Paul wrote, *“through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—”* (Romans 5:12, NASB95) And also, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* (Romans 3:23, NASB95) In the same way we get our physical characteristics from our mother and father we also are born with an unshakable desire to go our own way instead of God’s way - to sin.

We are all capable of good and evil. All have the ability to love and to hate, to create and to destroy, to show mercy and to murder, to be self-sacrificial and be self-centered. To repurpose a phrase - we are all born that way. In our next article in our look at the basics, we’ll delve deeper into the riddle of humanity’s conflicted nature.

Humanity’s Conflict

The crux of the riddle of humanity is the blending of two conflicting truths. On one hand, we are all created in the image of God. On the other, we are all corrupted by the sin of Adam and our own sinful choices. From this basic conflict flows a confusing mix of attitudes and mechanisms to resolve or manage those discordant themes.

One way we manage our conflicting nature is by trying to hide it. It's something we learn early on. If Mom and Dad can't see what I've done then I won't get in trouble. In a way, Adam and Eve did the same thing in Genesis three. They attempted to hide their shame from each other and themselves from God. Both attempts were futile. Jesus said, "*But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.*" (Luke 12:2, NASB95) So, hiding our sin may give us momentary relief but it is not a long term fix.

Another way we manage our conflict is by reframing sin as something good or at least okay. There are several avenues to take. We may try and shift the blame to someone or something else. We see Adam and Eve trying this tactic when God confronted them. Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Another avenue is by creating reasons why our actions are good or not bad. Call this rationalization. We rationalize our sin by saying things like: "no one got hurt" or "I deserved it." In the end, God is not fooled by our attempted misdirections.

A third way we manage our conflicting nature is through comparison. This attempt contains a nugget of truth in that we acknowledge our sin. But to minimize our guilt we look for someone guiltier than us. Hoping that God grades on a curve and we're good enough to make the cut. "After all, I am a good person," we say to ourselves. This does make us feel better about ourselves. But God doesn't grade on a curve, one sin is all it took for Adam and Eve to be subject to sin's curse.

A fourth way to manage this conflict is through appeasement. If I sacrifice enough, if I do enough good, if I avoid certain sins then God will have to accept me. Practically every religion is either built on appeasement or falls into it. Even Christians sometimes assume the mistaken math that doing good things will open God's ears to our prayers. But, as we'll see further on in our review of The Basics, the foundation of Christianity is God making a way for us and not our futile attempts to reach Him.

The fifth and final way of managing this conflict is through escapism. Some escape into being busy. Others by abusing alcohol and drugs to dull the heartache. Sex is an escape for some. TV and other entertainment is a popular escape. Family or a group of friends

may be the escape for others. Now, to be clear, most of these have their right and proper uses. The stark reality is that whatever we use to escape often becomes another god for us with its own set of rules and demands.

That is humanity's basic conflict. We feel both good and bad at the same time. Few who sin think they are doing evil for evil's sake. Even if their actions are truly evil, in their hearts and minds they are justifiable and desirable at that moment. The guilt and shame come later. We all think we're good, right, and justified even though we're not. As Paul asked, "*Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?*" (Romans 7:24, NLT)

We've all done this. We have all attempted to minimize our guilt and shame. Our solutions may have provided momentary relief to our inner conflict but none provided a final and complete resolution. The truth is that we are incapable of escaping from this pit and our attempts to deal with it often make things worse. Yet there is something far worse than our guilt to confront. In a way, our feelings of guilt, shame, and fear are like the warning lights on a dashboard. Our larger problem is sin's ultimate result of futility, separation, and death. Something we'll explore deeper in our next article in this series of The Basics.

PS - While the article ends above I didn't want to leave you in a pit of hopelessness. What we can't do God will do for us. The poetry of the Psalms says this, "*I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear And will trust in the Lord.*" (Psalm 40:1-3, NASB95) Only God can remove us from the slippery pit of destruction and set our feet on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

Humanity Solved

Let's recap the puzzle pieces we have so far concerning the riddle of humanity. The first piece recognizes humanity's creation in the image and likeness of God. The second piece identified the wholeness of spirit, soul, and body in each person. The third piece exposed humanity's flaw as the inherent desire to go our own way and not God's which is also called sin. The fourth piece wound through the conflict caused by these pieces. This fifth piece of the puzzle will uncover life's harsh reality because of our sin.

There are probably as many ways to approach life as there are humans. Some will gravitate to “live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful corpse.” Others will seek power over others in a vain attempt to control life. Some will seek significance through service. A few will seek total separation from all others. You could say that each of these has three things in common; futility, division, and death.

From the day of Adam’s sin, everyone has been subjected to a futile and sometimes even absurd existence. Consider God’s declaration of sin’s consequence to Adam in Genesis 3:17-19 *“The ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return.”* (NLT) Whether someone is dirt poor or filthy rich the result is the same. So what’s the point of life?

Also from the beginning, another consequence of sin emerged. Division, jealousy, and competition grew quickly in the Genesis account of our earliest days. Genesis 4:1-16 recounts the story of Cain and Abel. What followed was a sibling rivalry so intense it ended with Cain murdering Abel. Division and separation are also hallmarks of sin. Have you noticed that the more humanity grows the more it seems to divide? We seem to easily fall into camps of nations, race, politics, sports teams, tribes, clans, family, denominations, affiliations, and preferences. Sometimes killing each other, sometimes putting others down to raise ourselves up. This division is often a vain attempt to fight the futility of life through being a part of something larger than ourselves.

Lastly, the ultimate end of every human life is death. The Bible plainly says that death is the direct result of sin, *“For the wages of sin is death.”* (Romans 6:23a, NLT) It’s something we’re aware of but not something we dwell on until death strikes someone close. And yet its inevitability lurks in the background as we strive to create some kind of lasting legacy.

Recalling that moment in Eden, it may seem that God was wrong and the serpent right in the garden. Adam and Eve did not die when they took that first bite. Or did they? In that instant when sin entered, Adam and Eve became separated from God. You could say their spirit died which was followed later by their physical deaths.

Death always involves separation. Our anger at someone's choices might lead us to say "you're dead to me." Our sin separates us from God. Like Adam and Eve, we are spiritually dead long before we are physically dead. Whether we are born spiritually dead or become that way when we first sin is a debatable point - either way the result is the same. As Paul said, "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" (Romans 3:23, NASB95)

Humanity's best solution to the problems of futility, division, and death can be summed up as "eat, drink, and be merry." A conclusion also reached by the writer of Ecclesiastics, a book of wisdom also in the Bible. The teacher concludes, "*So I recommend having fun, because there is nothing better for people in this world than to eat, drink, and enjoy life. That way they will experience some happiness along with all the hard work God gives them under the sun.*" (Ecclesiastes 8:15, NLT) But then we encounter something Jesus said on the same topic, "*The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.*" (John 10:10, NLT) Humanity's best solution is to enjoy life while we have it with all its futility, meaninglessness, and absurdity. God, however, has another solution which turns everything around.

Sidebar – Of Men and Women

What is the relationship between men and women in marriage? A question that is fraught with trouble and strong opinion. But let's see if we can't discover God's intent and desire for this relationship.

Let's first lay down a few observations. In general, men and women are different physically, mentally, and emotionally. This is not to say that one is stronger or weaker or better or worse than the other, only different. The roles nature and nurture play in some of these differences is open for debate.

Another observation is that every person has their own unique set of abilities, likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, and other characteristics. Not all men are great mechanics, neither are all women fantastic cooks. So, within this discussion, there are wide-ranging individual differences to be accounted for as well.

There are also some commonalities to be observed. Men, in general, struggle with the need for significance; that their labor and their lives matter in some practical or cosmic

way. Rich or poor, powerful or weak, that need for approval and significance often drives their priorities. Women, in general, desire safety and security which likewise drives their priorities. Both of these needs are expressed in positive and negative ways.

Before the fall in the Garden of Eden, there existed easy equality between Adam and Eve. Both were created in the image and likeness of God. An image made more complete together than separately. With the fall came the curse, *“To the woman He said, ‘I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, In pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you.’”* (Genesis 3:16, NASB95) The man’s curse was directed at his labor and the struggles to grow food.

We also know that in Christ we are redeemed from the curse. Consider, *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—”* (Galatians 3:13, NASB95) But there is an “already but not yet” to this. The curse has been redeemed in Christ but the effects have not been pulled back. There are still thorns and thistles, there is still pain in childbirth. There is, however, a practical movement towards the restoration of God’s original design for men and women.

Over the years I’ve heard many sermons on Ephesians 5:22-23 to answer this question of relationship. Paul wrote, *“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.”* (Ephesians 5:22–23, NASB95) These verses, however, must be placed into their broader context for proper understanding. Pulling Ephesians 5:22-23 out of its setting leads to an unhealthy and unrealistic and unbiblical ideal of King Husband Slave Wife.

Speaking to all believers, Paul says in the preceding verse, *“and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”* (Ephesians 5:21, NASB95) To be subject means to humbly submit to one another. Christ-followers are not to rule over each other but to walk and work side by side with open hearts to speak and receive words of encouragement and correction. I like to call this a harmony of humility. Each person has their own abilities, likes, dislikes, and character. Yet in that diversity, Christ-followers are growing in unity with each other towards Christ. That includes the husband and wife of Ephesians 5:22-23.

Following Ephesians 5:22-23 is a much larger section detailing the role of the husband. *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for*

her," (Ephesians 5:25, NASB95) And, *"So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;"* (Ephesians 5:28, NASB95) Paul's revealed picture is not one of a perfect home with cookie cutter roles but a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ gave up everything out of love; husbands are called to the same kind of love for their wives. In fact, Paul spends more ink encouraging husbands to love their wives than for wives to follow the husband's lead.

Paul concludes, *"Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband."* (Ephesians 5:33, NASB95) In this Paul speaks to the generalized needs of women to feel safe and for men to feel significant. Paul's teaching for men to sacrificially love their wives as Christ loves the church answers the woman's need to feel safe. Paul's call for wives to respect their husbands answers the man's need for significance. Each one giving out of love to fulfill the weaknesses in the other - a complementary unity and a harmony of humility.

In the end, we must neither abuse Ephesians 5:22-23 nor refuse it. But when we place it back into its context a beautiful picture of real love and complementary unity is revealed for husbands and wives.

In practical terms. Each couple God joins together must work towards their own complementary place of side by side equality and unity. There are some things which Betty is better at than me, in those areas she takes the lead. And there are some areas I'm better equipped to carry than she is. We are subject to each other and complete each other and fulfill each other. Both of us encouraging and correcting each other as we grow in unity towards Christ. You see, headship in marriage is not lording over or making every decision but it is a call to serve, sacrifice, care, and love - even as Christ loves the church.

Essentially. Husband, your wife needs your love, your time, and your attention. Wife, your husband needs your loving encouragement. There is joy-filled pain in working this out as wife and husband learn to do life together in the humility of harmony.

God's Response to Humanity

The riddle of humanity seems like a hopeless mess. Whether we admit it or not, everyone is broken and has failed the potential of our creation in God's image. But there is one final piece to the riddle. A scarlet thread provided by God. Included in that fateful moment of God's confrontation of Adam and Eve is the promise of a Messiah, a savior that would crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). God provided the way for what men and women could not do themselves.

Perhaps what is the most loved verse of the Bible says, *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* (John 3:16, NASB95) Where Adam's sin brought futility, division, and death to all (Romans 5:12) Jesus death and resurrection brings life to all that will receive Him (John 1:12).

The Bible says that this new life offered through Jesus is a free gift, a gift of grace. The Apostle Paul said in Romans, *"But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many."* (Romans 5:15, NASB95) And to the church at Ephesus Paul wrote, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Ephesians 2:8–9, NASB95) What we could never do for ourselves or others God freely offers to all through Jesus.

A little over two thousand years ago a baby was born in Bethlehem. That baby born of a virgin was Jesus, God made flesh. God incarnate. The child grew and somewhere around the age of thirty began ministering to the people of Israel. Healing the sick, casting out evil spirits, doing miraculous things and teaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15). In the third year of His ministry, Jesus was arrested in Jerusalem. Tried, tested, and tortured by the Jewish leaders, the Roman installed king, and the Roman governor Pontus Pilate. Although Pilate declared Jesus not guilty he condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion to keep the peace. It was a slow, painful, and humiliating death. After Jesus took His last breath a Roman soldier thrust his spear into his side confirming Jesus death. At the request of a well connected and wealthy follower, Jesus' body was removed from the cross and placed in a sealed and guarded stone tomb. About 40 hours later, on the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead.

But Jesus didn't die simply because of political pressure to keep a fragile peace. Something else was going on, something the leaders of the day couldn't see. When Jesus was nailed to the cross He was carrying your sin and my sin for us. Paul wrote, *"For*

the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23, NASB95) Our sin, our punishment, our guilt, our shame, our fear was nailed to the cross that day (Galatians 3:13). He died so that we may have life, He lives to make all things right again.

This new life in Jesus is not thrust or forced on anyone, it is offered to all as a free gift. Paul put it this way, *"that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;"* (Romans 10:9, NASB95) Those who take that step discover a new life filled with purpose instead of futility, unity instead of division, relationship instead of separation, and an abundant life instead of death.

There is, of course, much more to our new life in Christ than we can explore in this article. The important point for the moment is that through Jesus the riddle of humanity is reconciled. The curse of sin is broken. There is, however, an "already and not yet" to our new life in Christ. We are already made right with God yet we are working and growing fully into it. Much of the Christian experience is "working out" what has changed on the inside. We are made alive in Christ but our body will still die and will be resurrected again to eternal life in a new heaven and new earth. The circumstances of our life may not dramatically change but our attitude and purpose towards it are radically changed. Where we were once hopelessly bent toward sin we are now fleeing sin and running toward God.

Chapter Three – The Bible

Our next section in this review of *The Basics of Christian Faith* will consider the Bible. What is the Bible? How did it come to be? What is its role in our walk of faith? These and other questions will be considered as we explore the collection of works called The Bible.

The Bible is a confusing book at times. It's not the work of a historian, although it contains history. It's not a psychological textbook, but it deals with humanity's innermost problems. Neither is the Bible like a novel which moves in a defined character driven arc or a mystery with a whodunit twist. At times there are assumptions of culture, ways of seeing the world, and shared experiences placed on the reader which modern readers don't have. Also confusing to some folks is the number of available versions, especially in the English language.

Even though there seems plenty to confuse readers just a bit of knowledge makes all the difference. In a way, learning about the Bible is like learning to read a map. To use a map we need to understand its orientation, scale, type, and what the symbols mean. Without that basic knowledge, maps are difficult to use. And likewise, so is the Bible.

The first thing to understand is the Bible isn't one book but a collection of 66 individual books. Of those, there are several literary types or genres. Some of which are common today such as historical narratives, poetry, and personal letters. Others are uncommon in modern literature such as the prophetic writings and end time visions. One key to understanding the Bible is recognizing the genre of any given section.

Another item to recognize is the broad time and cultural difference of the writers. The Bible isn't the work of one person but a collection of many writers. Some, like the writings of Moses, are around 3000 years old. And within the Bible's pages is a range of cultures from the nomadic tribal experience of Abraham to the palaces of King David and King Solomon to Roman-occupied Israel during Jesus' era to the metropolitan cities of Corinth and Rome which received Paul's letters. The Bible's continuing relevance given this large span of time and culture is truly amazing.

The Bible is also a well-preserved collection. Without diving too deeply into the discipline of paleography the textual evidence for the various books of the Bible is overwhelming in comparison to its peers from the same era. While none of the original

manuscripts exist there are thousands of painstakingly created copies and fragments of copies. The sheer number allow archeologists to confirm the transmission of the Biblical text through the ages. This is not to say there are no differences but that those differences are inconsequential. It should also be noted that the chapter and verse designations were added later to aid study.

Unless someone is reading directly from a Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text, the Bible we read is a work of translation. There are differences of interpretation and translation methods between the various versions. The English versions range from what are nearly word for word translations (KJV, NASB) to freer flowing thought for thought editions (NLT, MSG) with many combining the best of both (ESV, NIV).

Another difference between versions is the ancient texts upon which they are based. Older English versions such as the King James Bible are based on a collection of texts or codex called the Textus Receptus. Since then older and presumably more accurate manuscripts have been found. This is why some newer versions may not contain a word, verse, or section found in other versions. It's not some evil attempt to change the Bible but a desire to get as close to the original manuscript as possible.

Translators must also bridge the differences between the original languages with the language and culture for whom they are translating. Each translation is an attempt to accurately convey the Bible in the most meaningful way possible for the intended readers.

Knowing these things is not a prerequisite for understanding the Bible but it helps. The next seven articles will delve deeper into the Bible but there is a more important point. The Bible is useless if not applied. Unless we let God speak into our lives through its pages, chapters, and verses we're only reading some very old stories. I personally love and relish those moments when the Holy Spirit shines a spotlight into my life as I read the Bible. That moment when spiritual understanding supersedes my own finite understanding and my sinful habits. There is a painful joy when the Holy Spirit touches our heart and lives through the ancient words of the Bible.

God Inspired

The Bible we hold in our hands is special for one reason. It is like other ancient writings in that someone scratched an ink-laden tip across a piece of parchment or papyrus. Others have painstakingly copied those manuscripts for distribution and retention. At some point in time, the words were translated into other languages, English in my case. A journey which is similar to the writings of Plato or the histories of Tacitus (a Roman historian). The difference however between the Bible and other surviving writings of the Ancient Near East is the inspiration of God.

We often think of something inspired as being clever or having depth. An inspired work of art moves our soul, lifts our spirit, and says things we feel but are unable to find the words to adequately express. The artist or writer often refers to the seed of an idea, song, or painting as inspiration. But when we are talking about the Bible the word inspired means something different. Paul wrote to Timothy, *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”* (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NASB95). That word “inspired” in the original Greek is “*theopneustos*” or literally God-breathed.

It is this quality of inspiration that sets the 66 books of the Bible apart as the Word of God. But not the Word of God dictated to the writers. There’s much more nuance to the Bible. Sometimes the words we read are the very Word of God spoke prophetically or from the mouth of Jesus. At other times the stories and events portray the Word of God. Even the verses that seem local to that moment when the words were written, such as Paul’s greetings to individuals, reveal something of God’s heart.

Portions of Scripture which seem highly cultural and irrelevant for today still ring with God’s inspiration. Consider this verse from Ephesians, *“Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”* (Ephesians 6:5–6, NASB95) It seems like a throwaway verse written only for those held in slavery. But the Word of God still speaks since the same principles apply to all who work for someone else (be that an employer or a customer).

There are several principles of interpretation which will be explored in this section of The Basics. The first principle could be called “plain over all else.” We understand the more difficult passages through the plainer passages. Other principles include keeping the contexts of a passage, identifying the genre, recognizing the voices of the writer and the speaker in the passage, along with remembering the intended original audience. If the beginning Alpha principle is to look to the plain meaning, the ending Omega principle is reading out of the Word instead of reading into the Word - also called reading exegetically. We’ll cover that in our next article.

These principles of interpretation may seem daunting but once understood they become natural. We do many of them without thinking whenever we're reading something. We know, for instance, when reading a novel that we're reading a work of fiction which may be enjoyable but may not be historically accurate. Violating these principles when reading the Bible blinds us to the Word of God or worse yet we end up changing it into something God never intended.

It is this God-breathed inspired quality of the Bible that has impacted more lives than can be counted. But the Word of God has also been abused in harmful ways to dominate and control and fleece others. By holding to the principles of interpretation and the illumination of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-16) we will move, grow, and abide in God's living, holy, and inspired Word.

God's Story

I recently completed a 16x20 paint by numbers canvas. The whole project took around 20 hours spread out over five weeks. The results will never hang in a museum and speak more of persistence than creativity. But the coloring book task of brushing blobs of liquid color into those numbered places ultimately revealed a pleasing winter scene. Those blobs of color are all parts of a greater whole. But that greater whole is revealed through the parts. Parts within a context which are within a broader context which are within a whole. In a way, the Bible is like that paint by numbers project with blobs, context, and a revealed whole.

These layers of context within the Bible are important and keep us from abusing God's Word. The grand picture, what some have called the meta-narrative or the over-arching story of the Bible is God's redemptive work. Of all the verses of the Bible John 3:16 perhaps comes the closest to succinctly revealing that grand picture. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* (John 3:16, NASB95)

Move closer to the picture and five grand movements become discernable. Creation and fall, the story of the Hebrews, the coming of Jesus, the establishment of a community (church), and the ultimate redemption of a new heaven and new earth. The Bible organizes these into the Hebrew scriptures commonly called the Old Testament and the New Testament consisting of four Gospel accounts and apostolic letters to the fledgling churches.

A step closer and the various books and genres appear. We begin to discern the why, who, and when of a section. A little closer and sections within the books can be seen, even changes in genre and purpose. All of which informs the particulars of the words, sentences, and verses.

But the words and layers work toward and reveal the larger picture of God's redemptive work. Some have called this a "scarlet thread" which runs through the entire Bible. A thread which began at the fall of humanity, through the faith of Abraham, revealed in the Law of Moses and the histories of the Hebrews, felt in the Psalms, spoken in the prophets, made real in Christ, culminating in His death on the cross and resurrection on the third day, put into action through the church, and completed at the end of the age.

In a later article, we'll delve deeper into understanding the Bible within these contexts. For the moment, it is only necessary to recognize the layers and the grand picture they reveal about God and His love for humanity in general and each individual in particular. Everything in the Bible, from the harshest of stories to the bright hope-filled promises, is understood by God's love, His character, and His redemptive desires for each and every person.

Just think about that for a moment. God, the creator and sustainer of everything worked through the long pages of history with you in mind. If your life is in Christ you are one of those stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore God promised Abraham (Genesis 22:17) thousands of years ago. While the Bible reveals God's redemptive work to us it also invites and challenges us to be God's agents of that work today. Here I must add that there is more to God's redemptive work than we often suspect. We discover that more as we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us through the Bible.

Speaks To Us

When I was a kid, a sure sign something wonderful was around the corner was the Christmas edition of the Sears catalog landing in our mailbox. My brother, sister and I would study those pages filled with pictures of toys and gadgets with great care. We'd circle the things we really wanted and ignored what we didn't want. It's a fond memory of that age. But, sadly, it is also how many approach God's Word.

Marking and underlining verses in our Bibles is not a problem. In fact, I encourage it since it helps to cement those precious words in our lives. The problem is when we

search God's word for what we want instead of opening up our hearts and letting it speak to us.

Scholars and Bible teachers call these different approaches to the Bible exegesis and eisegesis. The later is reading the Bible in a way that is subjective to our wants as we pour the desired meaning into the words. In short, eisegesis is reading into the Word. On the other hand, allowing the Bible to objectively speak for itself is exegesis. The first leads to all kinds of trouble, false-teaching, and heartache. In a way, reading God's Word subjectively was the original sin as Eve bought into the serpent's twisting of God's command.

Reading God's word exegetically means we let God speak to us through its pages. Paul called this combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words (1 Corinthians 2:13). Some have rightly said that approaching God's Word in this way allows the Bible to read us. Our hearts become exposed and changed as we are challenged, corrected, rebuked, encouraged, and made hopeful through God's Word. As Paul wrote - "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;*" (2 Timothy 3:16, NASB95)

You could say that reading the Bible comes down to the question we're holding in our minds. Are we asking, "What can I get?" Or "what good thing can God give me?" Or "how does this support my viewpoint?" If those are our questions then we're looking at the Bible as a book of witchcraft and spells. The question we should hold in our minds is "What is God saying?" What was God saying to those original readers and what is God saying to me today? Context and language and bridging cultural divides and embracing tension all come into play when we read the Bible for what God is saying.

But there is a follow-up question. We can read the Bible with the right focus and still miss the mark. That question is "what do you want me to do with what You are saying to me?" Jesus explained this in the parable of the builders. Jesus began, "*Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.*" (Matthew 7:24, NASB95) He then told a story of one man that built on the rock and another on the sand. When the storms came the house on the better foundation stood while the other fell. But notice that the rock in this parable is hearing Jesus' words and acting on them. That "and" should be circled in red, highlighted, italicized, underlined, capitalized, and printed in bold type.

There will be times when a verse leaps out and grabs you. When the Spirit meaningfully shines a spotlight on something. Perhaps it is a promise or a something filled with hope. I have such a scripture tucked in my wallet. It's a simple card given to me by my mom over forty years ago - "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me Phil 4:13." But if those are the only kind of verses I let God speak to me then I'm missing the fullness of life in His Kingdom.

Read God's Word for what it is and not what you want it to be or what you want from it. Don't abuse it by making it a hammer of judgment or a book of spells. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you through its verses, chapters, and books. And when He does move your heart be sure to ask the next question - "what do I do with this?" It may be a moment of repentance, an act of grace to others, a change in attitude, a spark of faith, whatever that is do it. It's in the doing that God's Word becomes real and really speaks to us.

Veiled and Revealed

If I gave you a masters level textbook on Physics or Chemistry or Computer Science could you understand it? Probably not unless you've done the previous course work to become filled with the prerequisite knowledge and technical language. In a way, the Bible is like that, but it is also completely different. Where a novice in any of those disciplines is overwhelmed at the prospect of reading a master level textbook, a novice reader of the Bible can gain great insight through God's revelation of Himself.

Scholars and theologians speak of two levels of God's revelation to humanity. The first is called God's general revelation. Paul wrote, "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*" (Romans 1:20, NIV) Something of God is revealed in the world around us. The depths of the stars, the power of crashing waves, the colors of sunrise and sunset, and a baby's smile are a few examples of God's general revelation.

The second level of revelation is called God's specific revelation which is contained in the Bible. Through the Bible, God reveals His name, His attributes, His desires, and most of all, His love. But, just like some will look at majestic mountains and only see them as geological formations God's specific revelation is veiled unless it is sparked by something deeper and spiritual.

Paul compared this difference in 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 "*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*" (1 Corinthians 2:12-14, NASB95) While there is a reasonableness to the Bible there are also truths which can only be fully understood through the spirit.

Here we must be careful to avoid the error of the Gnostics. That ancient sect from the early days of the church held that the Bible contained secret knowledge which only certain people could understand or know. But the Bible is open to all who seek after God and not just to a few special people. Someone just accepting Christ can and does gain God's revelation of Himself through the Bible without having years of concentrated study.

There is a kind of feedback loop in this. As we read God's Word we understand more about God - as we understand more about God we gain deeper insight into His Word. Want to understand God? Get into the Bible. Want to understand the Bible? Get to know God. As we read the Bible God reveals more of Himself to our hearts and minds through the work of the Holy Spirit.

You see, through this section of The Basics some technical and theological methods are discussed. Knowing certain terms and proper use of context, hermeneutics, exegesis, tension, genre, layers, language, and the culture of the original intended readers are all technically important to stay on track. But, without the discernment, insight, and illumination of the Holy Spirit, all of those have little lasting value. Those technical considerations are important, but more important is God's revealing Himself through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

So I encourage you. Read and ponder the Bible with an ear to hear the Spirit. Ask "what is God saying?" Consider "what is God saying to me?" If something is difficult to understand don't gnaw at it but put it away for later. God will reveal it to you at the right time (that right time could be days, weeks, months or even years later). Pray and ask God to reveal Himself as you read the Bible. It is a prayer He loves to answer.

Understandable

One of the first truths emphasized by the Earth Sciences such as Geology is the importance of layers. In general, younger layers of rock and soil are always on top of older layers. The order and type of those layers tell a story of time. Where I live the layers tell a story of prairies and glaciers. The Bible is also understood through its layers.

Those layers in the Bible consist of context, original purpose and audience, genre, and something called hermeneutic. Understanding these and properly applying them prevents us from abusing God's Word and helps us hear what God is speaking.

The layer of context is made up of even more layers. To understand a verse we need to read the verses around it. That near context informs our understanding. For instance, taking Ephesians 5:22 out its near context - "*Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*" (Ephesians 5:22, NASB95) - we arrive at the wrong conclusion of what the husband and wife relationship should be like. But if the near context is considered we find that God intends a harmony of humility between husband and wife. Other layers of context include the section, the book, the testament, the whole of the Bible, and God's overarching story of redemption.

If our understanding of a verse violates or seems contradictory to any of these contexts then we may need to reconsider our understanding of that verse. But context is only one of the layers. Sometimes other layers help us properly reconcile these seeming contradictions.

Each book of the Bible was written to a certain audience and a particular purpose. Considering the original audiences, their place in history, their culture, and the issues facing them also reveals meaning. For example, Jesus famous parable of the Good Samaritan would have shocked and scandalized the original Jewish audience. In their view, it was more likely for the robbers to be Samaritans than the generous rescuer. Knowing that enhances our understanding.

Another layer is the genre. We consider the letters of Paul in one light, the Psalms in another, the Parables of Jesus as pointed stories. Included within genre is the consideration of who is speaking within the text and why. In the histories, there are many examples of someone speaking something other than God's word. A certain serpent comes to mind for example.

The Bible also contains genre which are not common today. Specifically the prophetic and apocalyptic writings. These writings are often steeped in symbolism and duality of meaning. Some of the prophecies, such as those found in Isaiah and Daniel, seem to have both a timely local message and a future aimed prophetic message. There is an interpretive principle which helps us avoid pouring unintended meanings into the prophetic writings. That principle is called sticking to the "main and plain." In short, we understand the harder to grasp passages through those verses which are more plainly understood.

Concerning the future revealing books of Revelation and parts of Daniel I offer this warning. The enemy of our souls would love to side-track us into worrying about the future. Whether that is the needs of tomorrow or the resolution of yet to be fulfilled prophecies. I used to waste a good deal of energy worrying about getting Christ's second coming right. Participating in the second coming is not determined by "getting it right" but by accepting Christ and doing the stuff of God's kingdom. The bottom line is that Jesus is returning. When, how, and in what order is a needless distraction. We are

to look forward but never to the exclusion of the harvest field or the work of the kingdom.

Study theology long enough and you encounter the strange word of hermeneutic. This is something we all have but rarely call by name. Our hermeneutic is the preconceptions we hold and the approach we take when we read anything, including the Bible. To what degree do we read the Bible literally or figuratively? What role do ancient culture and modern culture play as we read? Is there a specific theological camp which colors our understanding? Some of these preconceptions we've chosen and others we have gained through exposure. The important thing here is to understand that we have these preconceptions.

In the long run, no one hermeneutic is 100% right. God will not let us put Him into a box and forces us to stretch beyond our comfort. It is also possible to hold more than one hermeneutic at a time. We can read the Bible with literal and figurative and reformed and kingdom-based and redemptive points of view all at the same time. We will look more closely at this tension-filled method in our next article. It is, however, important to consider what preconceptions we hold and be humble enough to let God change them.

The purpose for knowing these layers is to read the Bible for what it says. To let the main and plain of context and purpose inform our understanding. But to also discern how our preconceptions are coloring our understanding as we read in God's Word.

Reasonable

As we approach the Bible there must be an attitude of humble balance. It's easy to take extremes. To find allegory where none was intended. To take thing so literally that reason must be abandoned. To allow all kinds of meanings because the Bible is "spiritually discerned." To become so tribal or "campish" that we only accept those portions which support our understanding. We must balance our understanding in a way that is humble, faith-filled, and reasonable.

To humbly understand the Bible is to recognize that we don't have all the answers. In many cases, we are reading someone else's mail. We are missing the real-life context and previous communication between author and audience. Perhaps we should remember God's response to Job's accusations - *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding,"* (Job 38:4, NASB95) I don't understand it all, but God does. I can be and will be wrong in my understanding, but God isn't. I cringe at Bible teachers and preachers who refuse to say "I don't know."

There is much in the Bible which is taken on faith and trust. Without faith and trust the Bible is impossible to understand and devoid of lasting meaning. Paul wrote, *"But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not*

been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain." (1 Corinthians 15:13–14, NASB95) In this, we must recognize which articles of faith are required. Those are the unchangeable aspects of our faith. Our views of the end times, the creation, church government, and justice are important but not central to our faith in Christ. God's existence, humanity's fallen nature, Jesus' incarnation and death and resurrection, the work of the Holy Spirit, the offer of salvation, and the final judgment are central unchanging articles of faith expressed in the Bible. I'm also wary of those teachers who major on the minors or raise minor points to the status of foundational truths.

The Bible is also reasonable. God invites us to reason with Him about the most fantastic articles of faith. The Bible says, *"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord, "Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool."* (Isaiah 1:18, NASB95) The impossibility of undying a cloth is met by the possibility of God. The impossibility of repaying our sins is met by the possibility of God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

God's invitation isn't to simply take it on faith but to reason with God about it. God invites us to ask questions. Jesus said, *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."* (Matthew 7:7–8, NASB95) Faith may not seem logical but add God to the equation and faith becomes logical and reasonable.

Found in the balance of humility, faith, and reason is a hermeneutic of tension. That "h" word simply means the preconceptions we use to interpret the Bible. Tension allows us to balance Biblical truths which seem at odds with each other. One such example is the Biblical mandate to love God in one corner with the mandate to fear God in the other corner. How can we love God and fear God at the same time? So, over the history of the Church folks have gravitated to one or the other. Perhaps not totally ignoring the other but rarely considering it or pushing it off to some far distant past or future. But the hermeneutic of tension invites us to hold both truths at the same time.

I like to use the example of a guitar string to illustrate this. For guitar strings to make music they must be in tension. One end anchored on the bridge, the other on the nut. A turntable shaft called a tuner allows the tension to be balanced until the exact note is found. When we put the love of God in tension with the fear of God what notes emerge? What truth becomes more evident? What I hear is the truth of relationship which reveals the father heart of God filled with love, wisdom, and discipline. That's just one example of tension found in the Bible.

We end where we began with a call to embrace humility and reasonable balance as we read and study the Bible. In the final verses of Revelation, there is a stern warning about adding to or taking away from the words of the prophecy (Revelation 22:17-19).

In context, the warning applies to that mysterious book, but I also see room to apply the same warning to the rest of the Bible. Most Jesus followers wouldn't dream of removing a book or adding a new one. But we must be careful or we'll achieve the same thing by ignoring, rejecting, or devaluing some passages because they challenge our preconceptions. A reasonable balance is only found as we embrace it all. This leads us to the topic of our next and final article in this section of The Basics in which we'll consider the authority of the Bible.

The Authority of the Bible

The Bible's authority in our lives is our choice. To be clear the Bible is authoritative in itself. It is bedrock. No other document is required for support. It is the Word of God. But the degree to which it is authoritative in our lives is entirely up to us. How do we approach the Bible? What do we do with what we read? How carefully do we handle its words? How easily do we discount what does not fit our views? In truth, what we do with the Bible is more important than we often think. What we do reveals its true level of authority for us.

How do you see the Bible? Is it simply an example of Ancient Near East literature? Is the Bible a kind of handbook which provides suggestions for a good life? Or is the Bible a kind of spell book describing ways to motivate God to bless our lives? Is it a book of law which requires slavish obedience? While there may be nuggets of truth in some of those they all miss the mark.

The authority of the Bible is bound up in God. Its pages reveal God's revelation of Himself. Some have called it God's love letter to humanity. Perhaps the closest analogy is that of a diary which reveals the heart of the writer. God inspired human beings to pen the words but through those words, He reveals His heart. God's power and grace are revealed as we hear Him speaking directly to us through those ancient words.

Real Christianity, authentically following Jesus, is found in the rhythm of hearing and responding. We begin our journey by hearing God's word. Whether it was spoken by someone, read it in a book, or discovered in a Bible left on a park bench. Somehow we heard a glimmer of God speaking to us; nudging our hearts. That glimmer sparked something. Paul wrote in Romans, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.*" (Romans 10:17, NASB95) Our response began a journey of faith. This rhythm of hearing and doing continues, but at any time we can refuse, we can ignore, we can simply become religious; hearing without doing - doing without hearing.

How we handle the challenging parts of the Bible also reveals something of its authority. The Gospel of John records a moment when Jesus taught some challenging truths in a difficult way. *“So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.”* (John 6:53, NASB95) The entire discussion can be found in John 6:41-71. These are difficult words since the disciples had neither the historical context of the Last Supper or the death of Jesus by which to understand them.

John continues, *“As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. So Jesus said to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. “We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.”* (John 6:66–69, NASB95) We likewise must decide whether to follow or walk away when the Bible speaks a truth which challenges our thoughts. We may not walk away from the faith, but do we walk away from the Bible’s authority for us. This is difficult at times, especially when the Bible goes against the tide of current culture.

Yes, the Bible is authoritative, it is God’s word. Some will abuse its power, using it to manipulate and control instead of humbly following Jesus. Some will twist those precious words to fit their desires instead of changing their heart. Others may use God’s word to judge and thereby usurp the work of the Holy Spirit. Some may use the Bible in a bid to gain wealth and power; wolves in sheep's clothing. All these things do happen. While they may tarnish the Bible’s image they cannot undo its power and authority in the lives of believers.

This concludes this section of The Basics. Yet, it is not complete. There is much concerning reading and understanding the Bible that we did not cover. Our goal was not to provide a complete tool chest but to provide some basic tools needed to stay on the right path. In our next section of The Basics, we consider Jesus. In truth, the whole of God’s word is understood through Him who is the Word - *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* (John 1:1, NASB95) Through Jesus, we understand all that came before and all that came after and glimpse what is yet to be.

Chapter 4 – Jesus

Jesus is... Jesus is the pivot point of history. The rock on which many stand and a stumbling block for many others. Jesus is the name above all names and a curse word. In his name, great works benefiting the lost, the least, and the captive were launched. And in his name, some have waged war and degraded others contrary to all Jesus taught and did.

At one point during his three years of ministry, Jesus asked his disciples a question. “Who do you say that I am?” One of his closest disciples, Simon Peter, answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16) The next set of articles in this series called *The Basics: A Readable Review of Essential Christian Faith* will look at various aspects of Jesus. Theologians call this Christology - the study of the nature of Christ, of Jesus.

Our first aspect of Jesus is perhaps the most vital. Get this one wrong and everything that follows is also wrong. While Jesus was born in a Bethlehem stable his existence didn't begin there. The Gospel of John begins, *“In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.”* (John 1:1–3, NLT) A few verses later John states, *“So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.”* (John 1:14, NLT) Jesus is God the Son.

Jesus himself stated this truth. One day Jesus was in the Jerusalem Temple at the Feast of Dedication. The Jewish leaders and folks kept asking him to declare plainly if he was there long awaited Messiah. *“Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me.”* (John 10:25, NASB95) He ends this declaration with *“I and the Father are one.”* (John 10:30, NASB95) Jesus was more than Messiah, the redeemer of Israel, he is the Son of God and one with God.

This one truth is like a sharp bladed razor. Those who refuse Jesus Sonship cannot except all that he did and taught. The supernatural miracles, even his resurrection, become myths and fairy tales if Jesus is not God the Son. If Jesus was simply a man then there is no special truth to be gleaned. On that side of the razor, he stands in the ranks

of wise teachers which we may choose to adopt or ignore. But knowing that Jesus is the Son of God changes everything. The supernatural becomes plausible. His teachings life-changing. On this side of the razor, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

There is also some mystery surrounding this truth. Some of it was discussed earlier when we considered the Trinity - <https://lambchow.com/2019/02/the-basics-1g-god-is-one-and-trinity/> The hows and when of Jesus being begotten of God is not revealed in the Bible. Here's the problem, the word "begotten" or "born" puts this in our linear timeframe but God is eternal. The classic understanding is that Jesus has always been in the same way as God. The hows and when are not vital, but the "is", the fact of Jesus Sonship, is vitally important.

Everything else which we will consider is empowered and made effective by this one truth. Throughout this section the question above all other questions is "Who do you say Jesus is?" Like Peter, part of my response is "You are the Son of God." What about you?

Jesus is Pivotal

While we recognize the eternal aspects of Jesus, God the Son, we must also recognize the historical nature of Jesus - the Son of Man. The Gospel of John reports, "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14, NASB95) Jesus entered the world at a particular time and place.

The Gospel of Luke provides a historical timeframe for Jesus birth. "*Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.*" (Luke 2:1-2, NASB95) But Jesus didn't just appear as an angel and disappear. He lived a life. He was born, had a childhood, grew to be a man, and at around the age of 30 began a traveling ministry proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

What we read in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John occurred in a particular time and place. It was a time of turmoil, of enforced peace, and of racial tensions. The Jewish homeland was annexed by Rome. The power of Rome brought peace, trade, and ease of movement although at a brutal price. While Jesus' native languages were Aramaic and Hebrew, Latin was the language of government, and Greek

the language of the marketplace in the Roman world. In Jerusalem, the Temple stood resplendent and called all Jews to worship in accordance with the Law of Moses.

We will explore more of what happened during Jesus' time on earth as this section progresses. For now, it is important to recognize that all this happened in a monumental moment of history. There have been many monumental moments of history. Each generation seems to have their "day". For my grandparents' generation it was Pearl Harbor, for my parents it was the assassination of President Kennedy, for me it is the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Each of those days changed their world in dramatic and enduring ways.

As life-changing as those events were they are limited, their ripples only reach so far for so long. Jesus' time on earth, however, still ripples and reverberates around the world, still changing the lives of people and the courses of nations.

In terms of Biblical history, Jesus is the pivot point. All that came before him pointed towards his time. All that has come afterward points back to his time. Christians understand the Law of Moses and the books of the previous testament through the words and actions of Jesus. But Christians also carry forward the ministry of Jesus in the spirit of Jesus. What is that mission, that ministry?

One day at the very beginnings of his traveling ministry Jesus attended a Jewish synagogue and was asked to read. Luke records:

"When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come." He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" (Luke 4:16–21, NLT)

A ripple, a moment in time, that still moves and guides all who choose to follow Jesus. The mission to bring Good News to the poor, proclaim the release of captives, to open the eyes of the blind, to free the oppressed, and the celebration the Lord's favor continues in Jesus' name. Sometimes in a literal sense, sometimes in a figurative sense.

Whether someone is literally a captive or chained by guilt, shame, or fear there is freedom in Christ.

No one else in the pages of history has impacted humanity in the same way as Jesus. The powerful, the notorious, and the famous all have their day. Some have even declared they were greater than Jesus. But a few years later they are eclipsed and forgotten as someone else with power or fame takes their place. Not so with Jesus. His teaching, actions, death, and resurrection continue to change lives and reshape the world. A moment in time, the pivot point of history.

Became Human

Beneath the trappings of Christmas, the family gatherings, the presents, colored lights, decorated trees, and classic stories is one simple truth. God became human and was named Jesus. This mystery is called the incarnation. The truth about baby born in a Bethlehem stable is both easy to envision and nearly impossible to grasp.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke each record parts of the story. How a virgin engaged to be married became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. They record the reason for Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem. The humble birth of Jesus in a stable. Of shepherds, angels, stars, and wise men from the east with precious gifts. Perhaps the testimony of the angels says it best...

“That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”” (Luke 2:8–14, NLT)

We know well the story of Christmas but struggle to grasp its true importance. Jesus left heaven, left infinity, left the power, the might, and the totality of being God the Son to become human. A helpless baby reliant on his parents. Fully grasping this is impossible. In some ways, it would be like you or I becoming an ant. Or moving from a three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional world. But even those fall far short. God

became flesh. Infinite became finite. All-powerful, all-knowing, all-present God became limited, became part of His very own creation. Yet, never stopped being God.

Jesus contained a dual nature. The baby born in Bethlehem was 100% human and 100% God. The Gospels contain this evidence. They record Jesus' humanness in his birth, his hunger, weariness, agony, and death. The Gospels also record Jesus' Godlikeness in his keen insight into the thoughts of others, the miracles, the knowledge of future events, and His resurrection.

Jesus faced temptation, encountered grief, is acquainted with sorrow, knew lack and want, felt compassion and anger. Whatever we face, Jesus faced it too. He was bullied, falsely accused, mocked, beaten, harassed, pressured by peers, pushed by enemies, tested by the powerful, and faced the expectations of others. His family didn't understand him. His hometown rejected him. In short, Jesus experienced everything we may also experience.

But Jesus didn't become human to find out what we are like. This wasn't a King becomes beggar moment to see how the other half lives. Jesus had a mission, a purpose to connect us to God. To bridge the divide caused by sin, to be the relatable connecting point between each one of us and God the Father, to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. That mission is the focus of our next entry in our look at the basics of the Christian faith.

Redeemer

There are many words, phrases, and metaphors used to describe Jesus primary purpose. Perhaps the most poignant for me is "redeemer." All the other words are fantastic and useful and necessary. But this one word seems to encompass the whole of Jesus' mission and our relationship to it.

So yes, Jesus is the savior. He is the propitiation (he paid for our guilt) of sins. Jesus is the good shepherd searching for us. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of God. All of those are contained in Redeemer. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—"* (Galatians 3:13, NASB95)

Redemption contains a sense of value. The giving of something of value to rescue something of value. But redemption also has an older meaning for those of Jesus' time. A meaning played out in the story of Ruth. In short, Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law

of Naomi, after much heartache, followed Naomi back to Israel. Both were destitute being widows and in Ruth's case a foreigner. Boaz, being a close relative but not the closest one, purchased the right to be their kinsmen-redeemer.

There was no entitlement on Ruth's part. She couldn't demand Boaz's actions. Likewise, no one is entitled to salvation, to redemption, to any grace of God. Our sin separates us from God with an impossible to repay debt of guilt. God didn't redeem humankind because we earned it or even requested it. All the action is fully on God's side through Jesus. Paul wrote to the Romans, "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" ([Romans 5:8, NASB95](#))

Jesus redeemed us through His cruel death on the cross. He took our guilt and shame to the cross for us. For each of us. We deserved God's wrath, we received His love. We deserved His judgment, we received His mercy. We deserved death, we received life. All through Jesus our redeemer, our savior, our Lord.

That is the simple and unique beauty of the Christian faith. What we could never earn God freely offers. All other religions attempt to appease a higher power through sacrifice and right-doing. Faith in Christ is centered on God making a way for us. This truth was so vital that early Christ-followers called themselves something along the lines of People of the Way. It wasn't until later that Christ followers adopted the name Christian ([Acts 11:26](#)).

In a business sense, God's act of redemption through Jesus was a terrible deal. The price of redemption far outweighing the value returned. But perhaps that is because our value of life, love, and each person is too cheap. In God's economy, it was an investment exceedingly worth the risk. Part of following Jesus is revaluing life, love, and each other and joining Jesus continuing mission to redeem others.

Perhaps this message of redemption is new to you. The Good News is that there is nothing to do but receive it. Jesus accepts us as we are right now with our sins, our guilt, our baggage, our wounds, our failures. By God's grace, you are redeemable in Christ. The work is complete. The only question is if you will receive it. Will you exchange your sin, guilt, baggage, wounds, and failures for God's forgiveness, love, release, healing, and life? All you need to do is ask.

Messiah

In many cultures there is celebration and anticipation when a mother announces she is pregnant. There are plans and preparations made, showers and parties to attend, progress to monitor as the day approaches. In some ways God did the same thing

between Adam and Eve's sinful fall and the stable in Bethlehem. Sprinkled among the pages of the Old Testament – from Genesis to Malachi – are God's announcement of the coming Messiah, The Christ.

Depending on the parameter's scholars identify 200 to 400 prophecies concerning the Messiah. Some have a vague quality, such as the Messiah being a descendant of Abraham (Genesis 22:18). Others are startling in their precision. Consider these lines from Psalm 22 written a thousand years before the Crucifixion of Christ. *"For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evildoers has encompassed me; They pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; They divide my garments among them, And for my clothing they cast lots."* (Psalm 22:16–18, NASB95) Matthew records, *"And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots."* (Matthew 27:35, NASB95) That is just one example of many.

Space does not allow a full review of these fulfilled prophecies. In a mathematical probability study, it was determined that the odds against one person fulfilling eight of the more specific prophecies was 1 in 10 to the 21st power (think 21 zeros following a number). The study illustrated this probability as if the entire surface of the earth blanketed with 120 feet of silver dollars, randomly marking and burying one of those coins, and a blindfolded person randomly selecting it.

That hope for God's Messiah fueled and sustained Judaism much like the hope for Jesus' second coming sustains Christians. Jewish scholars of that day knew well the prophecies concerning the Messiah although their hopes and worries colored their interpretation and expectation. Even Jesus' own disciples, recognized Him as the Messiah but expected an earthly kingdom and the return of Israel's glory days. But God had larger plans. Isaiah prophesied, *"He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations (non-Jewish; Gentiles) So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'"* (Isaiah 49:6, NASB95)

This stands as a warning to be cautious concerning the prophecies of Christ's return. Jewish scholars of Jesus day knew well the Messianic prophecies and missed seeing their fulfillment along with God's ultimate purpose. Some of us become so consumed with end-times prophecies they fail to engage with God's desires for the here and now.

A quick side note: It may seem to new readers of the Bible that Jesus' title as the Messiah has disappeared. But that is not the case. As the Gospel spread to the Gentile world the word "Christ", a Greek word with the same meaning as messiah, came into predominate use. Saying Christ Jesus is the same saying as Jesus the Messiah.

Understanding how Jesus fulfilled the ancient prophecies is a faith builder. It is more than a proof for faith but also assurance that God will fulfill His promises in the tests of faith we encounter every day. The one sure thing is that God will keep His promises, but He will do so in His own way, timing, and purposes. Trusting God is what faith is all about.

If you are interested in discovering more here is a short list compiled by Sheri Bell at Josh McDowell Ministry. (<https://www.josh.org/jesus-fulfill-prophecy/>)

His Nativity and Early Years

The fact: Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14; Jeremiah 31:22

The place: Numbers 24:17, 19; Micah 5:2

Adoration by Magi: Psalm 72:10, 15; Isaiah 60: 3, 6

His Mission and Office

Mission: Genesis 12:3; 49:10; Numbers 24:19; Deuteronomy 18:18-19; Psalm 21:1; Isaiah 59:20; Jeremiah 33:16

Prophet like Moses: Deuteronomy 18:15

Conversion of Gentiles: Isaiah 11:10; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalms 18:49; 19:4; 117:1; Isaiah 42:1; 45:23; 49:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; Joel 2:32

Ministry in Galilee: Isaiah 9:1-2

Preaching: Psalms 2:7; 78:2; Isaiah 2:3; 61:1; Micah 4:2

His Passion

Rejection by Jews and Gentiles: Psalms 2:1; 22:12; 41:5; 56:5; 69:8; 118:22-23; Isaiah 6:9-10; 8:14; 29:13; 53:1; 65:2

Persecution: Psalms 22:6; 35:7, 12; 56:5; 71:10; 109:2; Isaiah 49:7; 53:3

Triumphal entry: Psalms 8:2; 118:25-26; Zechariah 9:9

Betrayal by friend: Psalms 41:9; 55:13; Zechariah 13:6

False accusation: Psalms 2:1-2; 27:12; 35:11; 109:2

Silence under accusation: Psalm 38:13; Isaiah 53:7

Mocking: Psalms 22:7-8, 16; 109:25

His Resurrection

Psalms 2:7; 16:8-10; 30:3; 41:10; 118:17

His Ascension

Psalms 16:11; 24:7; 68:18; 110:1; 118:19

His Second Advent

Psalm 50:3-6; Isaiah 9:6-7; 66:18; Daniel 7:13-14; Zechariah 12:10; 14:4-8

His Universal, Everlasting Dominion

1 Chronicles 17:11-14; Psalms 2:6-8; 8:6; 45:6; 7; 72:8; 110:1-3; Isaiah 9:7; Daniel 7:14

Risen

The preeminent article of Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus. The Apostle Paul said, *“and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.”* (1 Corinthians 15:14, NASB95) Christians of various persuasions may argue and emphasize different points found in the Bible, but this one fact, this one article of faith, binds us all together. Christ is risen.

Jesus died. His death was witnessed by friends and enemies alike. John, the one disciple who witnessed Jesus’ death recorded, *“Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.”* (John 19:31–34, NASB95)

The death of Christ was a gruesome and tortuous affair. The scourging, which happened before being sentenced, would have caused massive blood loss. The method of execution was slow, painful, and humiliating. It was not uncommon for the condemned to last several days before weakness stole their ability to push up on the nails in their feet and grab a breath. Even if Jesus had been alive, the spear thrust of the Roman soldier would have killed him.

Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus. With the help of Nicodemus, they laid Jesus in a newly carved garden tomb, wrapped the body, and applied nearly 100 pounds of burial spices. A large stone secured the entrance. At the urging of the Jewish leaders, a squad of Roman soldiers sealed and guarded the tomb.

Early Sunday morning, several women close to Jesus went to the tomb with more burial spices. Matthew records, *“Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. “He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. “Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you*

will see Him; behold, I have told you.” And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.” (Matthew 28:1–8, NASB95)

For the next 40 days, Jesus appeared at various times to groups large and small. He still bore the nail scars in His hands and feet and the gash from the Roman spear. He ate fish with His disciples but could also enter a locked room. Neither the Romans nor the Jewish leaders could dispute the empty tomb. The disciples carried this message of Jesus’ resurrection out to the known world and suffered cruel deaths according to the historical tradition for proclaiming this one fact.

We also read that the central core of Paul’s mission was the resurrection of Christ. At the place of Greek Philosophy in Athens Paul declared, *” Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.” Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.”* (Acts 17:30–32, NASB95)

There are many proofs of the resurrection. The testimony of the women, the lives of the Apostles, the lack of refutation from Roman and Jewish leaders, the nagging question of who moved the stone all add credibility to the resurrection. Jesus died; Jesus is risen - the foundational fact of faith in Christ.

King of Kings

People approach Jesus in many different ways. Some see Him as a good teacher, an influential figure, or an ancient myth. Other’s approach him as the babe in the manger. Many as savior and redeemer with the cross in view. Some see Jesus as healer and in some cases, more like a genie ready to grant our wishes. But the Bible tells us we must approach Jesus in a life-shattering way that changes everything.

In many ways, our redemption in Christ is a two-step process played out in a variety of ways. The order and timing aren’t as important as accepting both parts. Many of us started by accepting Jesus as our savior. Asking for His forgiveness and inviting Him into our lives. But at some point, we were challenged to accept Jesus as Lord, the king of our lives. Paul identified this in Romans 10:9, *“that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;”* (Romans 10:9, NASB95)

The Lordship of Jesus is not optional. Paul wrote, *“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the*

name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth,” (Philippians 2:9–10, NASB95) Every knee will bow. Some willingly, some hesitantly, some begrudgingly, but all will ultimately bow to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Prince, pauper, king, slave, rich, poor, healthy, sick, every nation, every persuasion, every language, from the first person to the last, will bow.

But the more important question is right now. To what degree is Jesus Lord for you and me? We all have our kingdoms. The kingdom of self which is ruled by me, myself, and I. The kingdom of family. The kingdom of reputation. Perhaps a kingdom of work or business. Along with kingdoms of leisure and play. Jesus is the King of kings but will only rule over the various kingdoms of our life if we let Him. Our acceptance or denial doesn't change who Jesus is, only what He can do in us today.

People's acceptance or rejection of Jesus doesn't change His position as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. One day everyone will know it, will declare it. The question for us remains, is Jesus our Lord? What parts of my life do I still control? What parts have I given to Jesus? There's an old saying attributed to Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China – “Christ is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all.”

Even though Jesus is Lord, He does not enforce His right but woos us to open every door of our heart. So, Taylor is right, but there also needs to be room for Christ's Lordship to grow. Room for grace. The problem is, of course, that we seem to see clearly what areas are not under Christ's lordship in others but are generally blind to our own need.

It is also easier to adopt someone else's definition of Christ's Lordship than to take the time to discover it for ourselves. It is much harder to work out with Jesus the rights and wrongs of everyday life. But if Jesus is Lord, then Jesus is Lord and not Bill's, or Bob's, or Mary's, or Lucy's or...version of what that looks like. Yes, we very well may arrive at the same place, but it will be because Jesus is our Lord.

I heard this example once of the various degrees we accept Jesus' lordship. Think of a car. Is Jesus in the trunk like a spare tire, there just in case we have an emergency? Is Jesus in the back seat, we like being in His company but only when it suits us? Or, is Jesus in the passenger seat, close by ready to answer questions and suggest which way to go? Or have we given Jesus full control by inviting him to take the wheel and decide where, how, and when we are going? Jesus is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. But the question remains. Is Jesus your Lord?

Coming Again

There is much to say about Jesus, far more than we've covered in this section of our basic review of Christian faith. Our encouragement is to read the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for yourself. Even John admitted, *"And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written."* (John 21:25, NASB95) But there is one more important topic we must consider – Jesus' return.

Much ink and angst have been spilled concerning Christ's second coming. The when, how, who, and where have been pondered, discussed, and argued over for two thousand years. To be honest, it's not vital to have it all figured out and perfectly fine to say "I don't know" concerning those questions. Three things are certain, Jesus will return, everyone alive at the time will know it, and fake Christ's will claim to be him.

Jesus himself taught, *"But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. "And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other."* (Matthew 24:29–31, NASB95)

Jesus will return. When? I don't know – only the God the Father knows when that day will be. Since the time of Jesus' ascension following His resurrection, Jesus' followers have lived and served in the tension of the unknowable when and the expectation of "any day now." We embrace that tension by preparing to labor long in the Kingdom and living as if He will return today. Perhaps the best parable to understand this attitude is the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13.

Ten virgins waited for the bridegroom to return. Five thought ahead and brought along extra oil for the lamps, five did not. When the bridegroom was delayed the lamps of the foolish five began to go out. They ran to the oil vendors but were locked out the wedding celebration when they returned. The Parable ends, *"Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' "But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour."* (Matthew 25:11–13, NASB95) Prepare for a lifetime, live like it's today.

The second sure thing is that everyone will know when Jesus returns. Many have argued concerning how all the pieces fall together. Post-trib, mid-trib, pre-trib rapture? When the tribulation begins and the millennium reign happens. Folks on all sides have taught with certainty that they have it all figured out. I can tell you this – it is one of them, but I have no idea which. What I do know with certainty is if we're alive when Christ returns we'll know He's here. It will not be in secret or hidden or only revealed to a few select folks.

The article of faith is that Jesus is returning. The rapture, the timing, all the point of prophecy found in Daniel and Revelation can be probed for understanding, but having one view or the other should never divide Christians. Remember, *“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9, NASB95) So, instead of burning resources worrying about the end times lets invest resources pursuing what is on God’s heart.

The final sure thing is that many will come in Christ name either proclaiming to be him or to know something no one else does. Jesus warned, *“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance.”* (Matthew 24:23–25, NASB95) Signs and wonders are not the final proofs of faith or anointing or God’s endorsement. This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t supernaturally move or that we shouldn’t ask God to supernaturally move in the circumstances of our lives. Mature faith trusts God first and always without falling for the slick tricks of those wolves.

Navigating this requires wisdom. It is not wise to negate all signs and wonders. Nor is it prudent to elevate those who make such claims. Ask these questions. Who are they really lifting up? Jesus or themselves? Christ or their ministry? God or their “special anointing?” Who really gets the glory? If there is any doubt, then run the other way. The falseness is that of being special and drawing people for themselves instead of humbly pointing folks to Jesus.

Jesus will return. Let’s keep our hand to the plow until He does.

Chapter Five – Salvation

Saved and salvation are “church words” that find their meaning in the Bible. What does it mean to be saved? Why does anyone need saving? What are we being saved from? How is salvation achieved? What happens next? Those are the questions considered in this section of The Basics.

To even begin to understand salvation, we must recognize our need to be saved. Long before the events of the New Testament, the Psalmist wrote, *“I waited patiently for the Lord; And He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear And will trust in the Lord.”* (Psalm 40:1–3, NASB95) These few verses provide a framework for what salvation looks like from beginning to end.

Poetically the Psalmist saw himself as stuck in a pit of slimy clay, unable to climb out on his own. He called, God answered. But more than just pulling him out of the mire to the rim of the pit God set this rescued soul on solid ground, changed his heart, his desires, and his purpose. So, salvation is more than being saved from something, it is also being saved to something.

But why is salvation necessary at all? I’m a reasonably ok person that has lived a reasonably moral life. I’ve done more good things than bad in life and strive to be a good neighbor and citizen. I’ve never killed anyone or cheated on my wife. All things considered, I suppose that I am a pretty good fellow. If we’re honest, most of us think we’re good people, for the most part, and don’t feel stuck in the mud.

By our estimation, we very well may be good people, but that is not the standard which counts. We can only judge ourselves by the cultural standards of our upbringing, which vary by location and across the ages. But those standards change, even today some things permissible in my youth are cultural suicide today (and vice versa). So, we need to look elsewhere. To something solid and unchanging as a standard.

God sets the standards, and no one except Jesus has come close to meeting them. The Bible says, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* (Romans 3:23, NASB95) and the results of sin is death (Romans 6:23). We may not feel like we’re stuck in a slimy pit, but we are. And we can’t do anything to fix, repay, or even save ourselves – just like the picture in Psalm 40. Our only hope is for someone to hear our cries for help and throw us a rope. That rope is Jesus.

Many folks won’t realize the pit they’re in until they come to the end of themselves. Others will hear the message early in life and avoid more destructive paths. All need saved, all can be saved. God does not judge anyone’s worthiness because no one is

worthy. While I may not have committed any of the “big” sins, there are plenty of smaller ones on my account book with God. Yes, I too needed salvation.

As we said above, salvation is more than God’s plan to rescue us. We are saved from our guilt, shame, and the Kingdom of fear through Jesus. But we are also saved to a new life in Christ. We were dead, and now we’re alive. We were slaves to sin, and now we’re sons and daughters of God. The Prophet Ezekiel wrote, *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.*” (Ezekiel 36:25–27, NASB95) God’s salvation plan is not just a rescue operation, it is more than a repair and reclamation job, it is a total transformation into something brand new.

Whether we know it or not, the salvation found in Jesus is for everyone.

Foreseen

One thing clear in the Bible is that God had a plan. From Genesis to Malachi there are foreshadows, prophecy, and longing for God’s solution to our sin problem. Even hints that God would open the doors of acceptance beyond the confines of Jews. This article looks at some of those foreshadows, prophecies, and longings for the fulfilment of God’s salvation plan.

Foreshadows are hints often not seen in the moment. Authors often employ foreshadowing, but those moments may be missed unless someone reads the story twice. The Bible also contains foreshadows, little hints of what is coming. The first shadow is in the Garden of Eden after the fall. God pronounced judgment, even hinting at conquest over Satan. The foreshadow is, *“The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.”* (Genesis 3:21, NASB95) This would have required the sacrifice of an animal.

We must be careful about how much meaning we pour into that verse. Because it is offered without explanation care is required. Later events allow us to see the shadow. In one sense it is a shadow of the Law of Moses and the sacrifices required to cover sin. There is also a shadow of how Jesus’ sacrifice covers believers with His righteousness – in other words, salvation.

In the Book of Joshua we read about the fall of Jericho. Part of the story centers on Rahab, her assistance of the spies and the protection the spies offered for when the city

fell. The sign of this protection was a scarlet rope hanging from a window. See Joshua 2:17-19. That rope seems like a little thing, a bit of colorful detail. But it is also a shadow of salvation. Literal salvation for Rahab and her family when the city walls fell and a shadow of the scarlet blood of Jesus.

These are just a couple of the shadows. There are many scattered about the pages of the Old Testament. But God didn't just hint at salvation but also inspired poets and prophets which looked forward to the reality of God's plan.

One such prophecy is found in Isaiah. *"Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him."* (Isaiah 53:4-6, NASB95)

More difficult to see in prophecy is the opening of salvation to all. James quoted Amos 9:11-12 when the council considered what to tell Gentile (non-Jewish) believers. *"AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME," SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.*" (Acts 15:16-18, NASB95) Just because it is veiled doesn't mean that inviting all nations wasn't on God's heart from the beginning.

When we look at the prophecy concerning the end of the age we see a fuller picture. *"And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.""* (Revelation 5:9-10, NASB95)

This should tell us something wonderful about the heart of God. He had every right to wipe away creation and start over when Adam and Eve sinned, but He didn't. God instead worked in history until it was the right time to send Jesus (Romans 5:6). Neither is God willing or wanting to discard anyone, but He works and moves hoping all will accept His invitation – including you.

In Christ

In practically all other religions of the world acts, duties, and sacrifices are offered to garner favor with a higher power. This appeasement brings us to another church word related to salvation, "propitiation." One Greek Lexicon states that In Greek-Roman literature, a propitiatory sacrifice serves as an instrument for regaining the goodwill of a

deity (BDAG). In other words, the worshipper placates the deity, thereby gaining favor in some way. Either warding off their anger or being rewarded with their favor. In Christianity, propitiation is still present but in a completely different way.

For many in the Western world, this idea of placating gods seems antiquated and archaic. The residue of ancient superstitions. Yet many still practice it to curry favor from those more powerful through various gifts and personal sacrifices. Sometimes propitiation is seen through the lens of karma and its nebulous unmerciful system of punishment and rewards. So, while the word itself has fallen out of disuse, its actions have not.

In the Christian faith, propitiation is completely upended. John wrote, *“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”* (1 John 4:9–11, NASB95) Instead of demanding propitiation, God provided it on our behalf through Jesus.

That God loves us and sent Jesus who became the way, the truth, and the life for all that would follow is amazing grace. God knew that we could never appease the wrath due to us because of our sin fueled choices. (see Romans 5:9) We deserved wrath and judgment, but God gave us mercy, grace, and love – but not without a terrible cost. *“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us.”* (Ephesians 1:7–8, NASB95)

This one act of Jesus covers all who would accept it. It is offered to all, but not all will accept it. But the propitiatory act of Jesus is more than just turning away God’s wrath. It is a demonstration of God’s grace and righteousness. (Roman 3:21-26) No one can do enough good or make enough sacrifices to earn God’s forgiveness and favor. *“For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”* (Romans 8:3–4, NASB95)

The Prophet Micah asked, *“With what shall I come to the LORD And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”* (Micah 6:6–7, NASB95) What does the Lord want? The answer is in the next verse. *“He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?”* (Micah 6:8, NASB95) In other words, it is as if God says “Follow me. Do as I have done for others. Not to earn my favor but to demonstrate the love and grace you have received.”

Yes, the doorway of Salvation is opened through the grace of God's propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. The cross covers us with His righteousness and turns away God's wrath. But it also strongly encourages those who stand in that grace to demonstrate it to others.

Accessible and inclusive

There is a parable of Jesus which illustrates the next aspect of salvation to consider. In Luke 14, Jesus was invited to eat a meal at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. Perhaps even a member of the ruling Sanhedrin. A trap was laid testing whether Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. Jesus challenged their understanding of mercy and healed the man. Then Jesus noticed the other guests jockeying for position by choosing to sit as close to the leader as possible. In response, he taught about taking to least position - *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 14:11, NASB95) While there are important lessons here, they also set the table for a greater lesson.

Jesus continued and advised the leader to invite those who could not repay him in return. Specifically, *"when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* (Luke 14:13-14, NASB95) The common practice of the day was to invite guests that would advance your own standing, business, and influence. A defined list of those "in" and those "out." Jesus challenged the leader to invite the "outs." In response, one of the other guests said *"Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"* (Luke 14:15, NASB95) All these incidents, the test and healing, the jockeying for position, the advice to invite the "outs" set the stage for the parable found in Luke 14:16-24.

In the parable, a man invited some people over for dinner. Once the meal was prepared, he sent his servant to let the invited folks know. All of them provided excuses and refused to attend. The host, angry at their refusal, said to his slave, *"Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame."* (Luke 14:21, NASB95) The servant did so and reported that there was still room. *"And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel (NLT - urge) them to come in, so that my house may be filled. 'For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"* (Luke 14:23-24, NASB95)

There is a principal of Biblical Interpretation that parables have a singular primary meaning. But I wonder if this parable doesn't break the mold. The primary point often cited is that those first invited and subsequently refuse are excluded. They are the "outs" now. And some have used that understanding for the evil purpose of

antisemitism. But behind that surface understanding is a larger and more inclusive point. The Kingdom of God, the salvation offered through Jesus, is open to all who accept the invitation.

To be fair, looking across the ages, Christians have not always done well portraying the Gospel's inclusive invitation. Sometimes the message and invitation was/is mixed with that of the sending culture. To accept the Gospel also meant adopting the proclaimer's ways of life. More often, however, this failure was passive. Not going to the streets, alleys, highways, and hedges where the poor, crippled, blind, lame, rough, and sinful wait for their invitation and for someone to care.

Salvation is open to all. From the poorest of the poor, the vilest of sinners, to the upper crust of society, and everyone in-between. There are no disqualifiers or stipulations or prerequisites or conditions or prejudice concerning God's invitation. This doesn't mean that everyone is saved or will be saved but that all have the opportunity. All are invited, just as they are at this very moment.

This challenges us. Challenges me. It is one thing to think and say it. But is it real for us? What about the homeless we encounter. Or the foreign-born folks we encounter while shopping. Or the parts of the city we seldom go because their poverty scares us. But long before we invite them to the good news, we need to accept and care about them as people. They're not just a mission field, not just a place to do something for God, not just a way to feel good about ourselves. When we go in that attitude, we're not any better than those jockeying for the best seats at the table.

All are invited, the challenge is living it out.

Sidebar – Lost Salvation

While considering the wonderful, grace-filled, gift of salvation through Christ, we must come full faced with an important question. Can we lose our salvation? A question dividing Christians for hundreds of years into those saying, "no way, can't happen" and those saying "yes, it can." Both camps have produced mountainous volumes on why their view is right and the other wrong. Each has supporting scriptures to back up their view. In my view, both sides make good points and both sides make errors in application.

Now, there is no possible way for a 1200-word article to refute or acknowledge every argument on both sides. If we boil away the dross, we come down to two primary verses. One on the "can't happen" side and one on the "yes it can" side. Both verses are clear and unambiguous.

On the “Can’t Happen” side - *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”* (John 10:27–30, NASB95)

On the “Yes It Can” side - *“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.”* (Hebrews 6:4–6, NASB95)

So, we have a conflict. And not a minor one since the answer affects our attitudes, faith, and feelings of security in Christ. The problem is that to argue for or against either side, we must resort to hypothetical instances. What if someone does XYZ? God, however, doesn’t deal in hypotheticals but works inside those unseen places of our lives; our soul, our heart, and our intentions. As God said to the Prophet Samuel, *“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB95)

There is no magical glow that announces our eternal condition for all to see. Many say and do the right things, but do not really belong to Jesus. And there are many whose lives fall far short of God’s desires, who struggle with addictive sin, but who truly are His. We cannot judge the outward appearance since that judgment is faulty. So, hypotheticals are nearly useless since only God and (to a lesser degree) each individual can say what is in their heart.

I think there is room for both camps, but we do need to recognize that there is no certain singular answer to this thorny question. While Christians may argue about it, this should not be a point of division. My personal belief is that it is possible to “lose salvation,” but it is very, very difficult and highly intentional. In other words, salvation can’t be lost like a set of keys or a coin slipping from our pocket, but it can be rejected and renounced like citizenship or family membership. But where and when that line is crossed is ultimately up to God.

No one can snatch you out of God’s hand. No one can steal God’s gift of grace from you. There is security there. All of our sins – past, present, and future are covered in Christ. Yet, Jesus’ lambs desire to turn from sin and towards Him. We are secure but staying within that security is up to us.

We all struggle against sin. And sometimes everyone, even the most mature believer, stumbles. Salvation doesn’t rest on our personal sinlessness, but on our belief in Jesus and our desire to follow Him. Neither are we to use God’s grace as an excuse or as a

“get out of jail free” card. That moment we think, “I can do this because God will forgive me,” we are on the precipice of falling from His hand.

Are we eternally secure in Christ? Yes. Can we walk away from that security? Yes, although it is extremely difficult and is completely intentional. Can we fall into sin and still be saved? Yes, because our sins are forgiven in Christ (even those we don't yet see). Even if we intentionally sin claiming God's forgiveness in advance? Yes, but that is a path which will lead us out of God's hand. Go that way often enough and every bit of our heart will be turned away from God with no path back.

For those struggling with a sinful addiction, I want to leave you with hope. If you've turned your life over to Jesus, you are secure in Him. You may fall into that sin many times yet. That's not God's desire, but it is possible. Falling is not the end of the story. Running away from God is. As long as you get up, run back to God, confess your sin, and lean on 1 John 1:9, He will forgive you. He will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. You *will* experience freedom from that sin in Christ. Sometimes He does that overnight, but sometimes He takes us on a longer road.

For those not struggling with a sinful addiction – yes you are. It's just not one of the socially unacceptable or “big” addictions. You may not fall victim to drugs, alcoholism, gambling, or sexual addiction. But you may be addicted to pride, to gossip, to judgmentalism, to legalism, to self-centeredness, etc. Those are just as damning, and every bit as much of a prison – even more so since those prison bars are nearly invisible. We all have a sin addiction. Each one of us is only righteous because of God's grace.

Like I said earlier on, it is not possible to cover all of the arguments and “if, and, or buts” of the theological positions held by various camps. I can hear them rumbling around in my head saying “but what about...” The real conversation which needs to happen is between each one of us and the Holy Spirit. Paul said, “*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,*” (Romans 8:16, NASB95) It is also the Holy Spirit which convicts us of our sin, including the deep-seated sins we may not even know about yet. We all need that open-hearted conversations with the Holy Spirit – both for the assurance of security and for the conviction of sin.

Salvation is Free (but not cheap)

There's no such thing as a free lunch. We may not pay for it, but someone does. The same is true for everything politicians offer to get votes. Free education, free trash collection, free healthcare – none of those are really free. Either we pay for them in some way, or someone else pays for us. This is also true of the salvation offered in Christ.

Salvation is free, but it wasn't cheap. We don't buy our way in with either money or good works or sweat equity. No one earns salvation. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Ephesians 2:8–9, NASB95) That free grace of God came through the cross of Jesus. Salvation is free, but it was bought with a terrible price.

Some have scoffed that since God knew Jesus would be raised again to life that "it wasn't much of a sacrifice." But consider this. When we consider the Trinity, we recognize that the unity and relationship between Father God and God the Son are eternal. Yet that which is inseparable became separate as God looked away as Jesus carried our sin and suffered our punishment. *"About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?' that is, 'MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?'"* (Matthew 27:46, NASB95) There is no way to express in limited and finite words the heartache and pain Jesus and God felt in that moment when the inseparable experienced death and separation.

No, salvation wasn't and isn't cheap, but it is free. Isaiah prophesied, *"But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:5, NASB95)

But in a sense, while salvation in Christ is free, it also "costs" us something. Salvation "costs" us our brokenness, our sinful habits, our self-centeredness, our pride – in fact, it "costs" us our lives. Not that we sacrifice ourselves to gain God's favor but that we exchange our old life for a new life in Him. Paul wrote, *"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."* (Romans 6:4, NASB95) Some have rightly called this the "Great Exchange." We give God our junk; He gives us more than we can possibly imagine.

And here we enter a bit of a quandary. When we turn our lives over to Christ and receive His forgiveness, we are fully saved. We are no more saved at the moment of our last breath, then we are at the moment when we first accept Christ. And yet, as we grow in Christ, we do (and should) more fully walk into that salvation. My attitudes, desires, intentions, sin-habits, life choices, and world view have changed greatly since that first day, and they continue to do so. Call that the true fruit of repentance. Not that we are completely pure from sin, but that we turn from it and towards Jesus whenever we see it.

Salvation is free, but we still need to work it out. To grow into it. Paul wrote, *"So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."* (Philippians 2:12–13,

NASB95) We are fully saved, yet every day our salvation in Christ should become more real in every corner of our lives.

Salvation is Complete

Let's make no mistake, the salvation we receive is complete at that moment of acceptance. There is nothing more we need to do. It is finished. As Paul reminds us, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;*" (Ephesians 2:8, NASB95) We won't be any less saved on that first day of salvation than the day we die or Christ returns. But that is not the end of the story.

In many ways, that moment of coming to Christ, of receiving His grace, love, and salvation is not the end of the journey but the beginning of one. Not a journey of being more saved, but of working out that salvation in all aspects, events, and circumstances of life. James wrote, "*For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*" (James 2:26, NASB95). And Paul wrote, "*So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*" (Philippians 2:12–13, NASB95) We must always see those verses within the understanding of completed salvation.

In this seeming conflict between experiencing salvation as a gift of God and needing to work out our salvation, we arrive at a truth. In this time between new birth and Christ's return, salvation (like God's Kingdom) is the quality of "already, but not yet." All who accept Christ are saved, but the fullness of that salvation is not yet experienced.

Acknowledging this "already, but not yet" character of our life in Christ answers several questions. Why prayers are not always answered? Why do we still struggle with sin? Why do some live in poverty while others experience wealth? Why are we still subject to disease and physical death?

Let's take answered prayer as an example. We see God answering prayer, that much is certain. But why doesn't He answer all prayers? As we grow in Christ, as we walk this journey, as our hearts and attitudes change from self-centered to Christ-centered, our prayers change. That's part of "working out" our salvation. We grow towards praying according to God's will and desires instead of praying our own will and desires. Many pray for God to change their life circumstances, but only a few pray for God to change them. There is no magic formula here. God does answer, although it is not always according to our desires or wishes.

Our salvation is complete in Christ, but the degree to which it impacts our life; influences our choices, and changes our outlook is not yet fully realized. We do truly begin our new life in Christ like a baby and grow into all that our new life in Christ is about. A baby is completely formed and completely human. Yet, they are not fully functional. Babies learn and grow as they are nourished and cared for. Even when mature, we still grow (in many different ways), learn, and change throughout our life. Likewise, we are to continually grow in Christ.

Paul prayed this for the Ephesians. *“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”* (Ephesians 3:14–19, NASB95)

We are completely saved in Christ, yet we grow into experiencing and applying that reality.

Salvation is More Than...

We close this section of the Basics on Salvation by pointing out a few misapplications. These are essentially ways in which salvation in Christ is misunderstood or less than it really is. Falling into these doesn't mean that salvation is not real for us but that we are not walking or striving after its fullness in Christ.

Let's call the first misapplication “Fire Insurance.” Salvation is so much more than escaping the flames of eternal judgement. While there is the benefit of eternity with Christ, the benefits of salvation begin now. We have access to God's throne now. God works in our life now. Sometimes I wonder if Christians are overselling eternity and underselling what faith in Christ means for each and every day. Not that eternity with Christ isn't huge or real, but for many if not most, the mountains of problems in their life today are more pressing than a distant promise. If all we see in salvation is fire insurance, then we're missing a whole lot of life in Christ.

The second misapplication is seeing salvation as some kind of group initiation or “getting religion.” There is a social aspect to our life in Christ. We desire to be with folks, to worship, to support, to serve, and to care for each other. But if the social aspects are all there is, if lives are not wonderfully changed, if the kingdom of God is not advancing, then we become a social group and not a family of believers. We'll explore this more when we consider the Church in an upcoming section of the Basics. But for some

salvation is not experienced as new birth but as entrance to a new club. The benefits are not what Christ does but what the others in the club have to offer.

A third misapplication is seeing salvation as a means of getting our desires. That salvation is a door to riches, prosperity, fame, or perhaps a last-ditch effort to find solutions or meaning. Some of this is false advertising. Yes, God does hear our prayers and knows our struggles. He does promise an abundant, rich (think rich in meaning and not rich in wealth) and satisfying life (John 10:10). But salvation means that we come to an end of ourselves, throw off our desires, and adopt the desires of God. Jesus himself said, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* (Matthew 6:19–21, NASB95)

Nearly everyone coming to Christ for Salvation starts in one of these three. We are scared of eternal judgment, we are drawn in socially, or we have come to the end of our rope and want God to fix our lives. The problem isn't starting there, it is staying there. My first step of salvation was motivated by the fear of hell. But today that fear is not as important as loving God, loving others, worshiping Him, serving Him more and more each and every day.

Salvation in Christ is “fire insurance”, it does usher us into a new family, and does invite us to bring our problems and challenges to God. The difference however is what salvation is really all about. A changed heart and changed desires. No longer is the most important person in my life me. Jesus is. That step of faith in accepting Jesus as savior must, at some point, be followed with the second step of accepting Him as Lord. Sometimes those happen in quick succession, sometimes they are years apart.

Chapter Six – The Holy Spirit

So far in this series called *The Basics: A Readable Review of Christian Faith*, we've covered five important categories. We looked at the nature of God, the nature of humanity, the Bible, Jesus, and Salvation. Our next section dives into the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.

There is always a bit of mystery around the Holy Spirit. We can relate to Jesus in His humanness. Read His words in the Gospel accounts, see His actions and responses, and connect with His stories. Through Jesus, we also connect with God the Father in ways not possible in the previous age. But the Spirit, while present seems different. And yet, the Bible reveals the Spirit as a person with the same attributes as God the Father and God the Son.

The Holy Spirit is vital to our faith. He is the revealer which called to us long before we accepted Christ. And He testifies to us that we are Christ's (Romans 8:16). In both testaments, it is the Spirit which moves and inspires folks in action and prophecy. *"When they came to the hill there, behold, a group of prophets met him; and the Spirit of God came upon him mightily, so that he prophesied among them."* (1 Samuel 10:10, NASB95)

The first recorded activity of the Holy Spirit was during the construction of the wilderness tabernacle (Exodus 35:30-35). Bezalel and Oholiab were empowered of the Spirit with craftsmanship and hearts to teach others to implement God's plan, which was delivered to Moses. In a sense, the Spirit allowed them to proclaim God through the craftsmanship of wood carving, metalwork, engraving, embroidery, and others. Each piece of the tabernacle revealing and praising God in some way.

There are many ways the Holy Spirit moves folks to see and praise God. But the keenest revelation is what each person can experience if they hear His call. The Book of Hebrews says, *"And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 'THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM,' He then says, 'AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.'"* (Hebrews 10:15–17, NASB95) It is the Spirit which reveals God to us.

It is perhaps easy to see this aspect of the Holy Spirit as being like our conscience. And there does seem to be some overlap between that little voice which warns us of danger and the work of the Holy Spirit. And yet, there is a depth which is greater than our conscience. While the conscience warns and steers us, the Spirit changes our hearts and rewrites the rules our conscience follows.

The Holy Spirit is working in everyone to reveal God. For the unbeliever to see and accept. For the believer to see all God has for them. The Holy Spirit is working whether we don't believe, relegate Him to a small part of our faith practice, or embrace "Holy Spirit goosebumps." Even those who are open to the work of the Spirit limit Him at times. The Spirit works both in the quiet changes of heart and in ecstatic prophetic utterances. He's there whether we notice Him or not, revealing God to our hearts.

When we say that the Holy Spirit only works a certain way, only reveals through pre-ordained methods, we aren't limiting Him, but we are limiting ourselves. That nudge of the Spirit may come from a misty mountain morning, a verse from the Bible which seizes our hearts, an unconnected phrase which takes on a new meaning, that little voice of conscience, the prayers and encouraging words of others, through craftsmanship of every kind, by the actions of others, and through our emotions. (I'm sure I left some things out). The Holy Spirit is revealing God in languages and means so that all may hear and be drawn to Jesus and God.

Convicts

Sometimes there are moments in life when two unassociated events coincidentally collide. Call them serendipity or call them God-incidences, either of which recognizes a spark of unique timing. The first "event" is the topic for this entry of our journey through the basics of faith. Specifically, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. The second is a question which came to me through email in response to our Forgiveness Bible Study. "What is sin?" To understand the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, we also need to understand the nature and reality of sin itself.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives us a clear picture of the work of the Holy Spirit. We won't print it all here, but that promise can be found in John 16:7-15. In it, Jesus lays out three main purposes for the Holy Spirit; convictions, guidance, and revealing Jesus. Of importance for this topic are verses eight and nine, "*And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me;*" (John 16:8-9, NASB95) One work of the Holy Spirit is to convict the world (this includes us) of sin. But this sin is deeper than identifying offensive action or inaction since it goes to the very root of unbelief.

When we judge sin, we can only look at what is seen. While we'd like to really know someone's intent, we can only assume intent based on their words and actions. If someone steals a loaf of bread they are guilty, but the actual intent is hidden. Are they stealing out of jealousy? Out of need? Because they were challenged by someone else?

Or just to cause harm to the owner? Courts and legal systems try to get at intent, but only God knows for sure.

But what is sin? We have a sense of when someone offends or sins against us. Those feelings usually stem from the loss we feel. Someone wrongfully took something from us. That something could be tangible like bread or intangible like our dignity and honor. From a God's eye view, sin is rooted in unbelief and a desire to be our own god and go our own way. God says "don't" and we do it anyway. God says "do" and we run the other way. Sin violates God's commands and always stems from unbelief.

Sometimes we know we're rebellious towards God. But more often than not we think we're doing the right thing. The first bite of the forbidden fruit is always sweet and satisfying. Our unbelief may be that God doesn't care or that we know better than God does or if God were in our situation He'd do the same thing or God doesn't exist, so it doesn't matter anyway. All of humanity rationalizes their sin in some way or another.

Enter the Holy Spirit to break through our rationalization and reveal our sinful self. We often consider the moment of salvation as God's amazing grace. But I also wonder if having our eyes opened to see our own sin isn't also a work of grace. The self-righteous don't see the need for repentance while sinners do see their need thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Conviction is more than seeing our sin. In the word are legal overtones and consequences. A defendant is convicted when they are declared guilty. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is more than revealing sin but also convicting of guilt. Including you and I. This may seem harsh and unloving. No one likes it when faults and sins are pointed out. But if we accept it and repent then forgiveness, grace, and mercy flow. We all want more love and more power from God, but the path is paved with more conviction of our sin and more revelation of God's amazing grace.

Seeing our sin is never fun. It's like turning in an essay to the teacher which we think is perfect and deserving of an A+. But after the teacher grades it. Marks up our misspellings, our run-on sentences, or faulty logic and gives it a C-. That's what seeing our own sin is like. But if we'll accept the Holy Spirit's conviction, agree with God about our sin (confession), desire to turn away from it (repentance), ask for His forgiveness through the blood of Christ, then God will forgive us and "cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And that does feel good.

End Note: For many years I've worshipped and served with those open to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. They've gone by various names; Pentecostal, charismatic, full gospel, third wave. These next words are meant mostly for those friends. We love it when the Holy Spirit shows up (so to speak). When Holy Spirit inspired words flow, gifts are employed, and we feel His presence. Yet, I think, that we who easily enter this aspect of grace often ignore or fail to embrace the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. If

conviction and repentance are not happening alongside the other gifts, then we really need to step back and examine our purposes. The move of the Spirit is not to make folks feel good or to prove our faith but to draw folks closer to God.

Helps

One of the many mysteries concerning the Holy Spirit goes to identity. His name is not revealed in scripture. God the Father revealed His own name to Moses at the burning bush – I am that I am, YHWH. God the Son is Jesus, or more properly Yeshua – YHWH Saves. There are also other descriptive titles for God and for each of the Trinity.

In John 14:16 Jesus revealed the Holy Spirit's descriptive title as the helper, *"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever."* (John 14:16, NASB95) The actual Greek word in John's text is *parakleton*, a word filled with the complex meaning of a comforter, encourager, and legal advocate all rolled into one. The Expositor's Bible Commentary defined it as *"a person summoned to one's aid."* It may refer to an advisor, a legal advocate, a mediator or intercessor." ¹

The closest example may be that of the advocate who stands with, speaks for, and encourages someone. They may have a legal function but are really there to help someone navigate governmental, legal, business, and public systems. Think of a child's advocate or senior advocate. A stronger, wiser, more mentally aware person whose responsibility is the welfare of the person they are advocating for. For someone in that role there are three duties, to comfort and encourage, to provide guidance and assistance, to intercede on behalf of; to stand between the powerful and the weak. Each of these is also the works of the Holy Spirit.

Comfort and encourage. Jesus said, *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."* (John 14:26–27, NASB95)

One of the most common testimonies concerning the work of the Spirit is the sense of peace amid life's turmoil. That calming presence which overwhelms the moment of conflict, loss, or confusion. In those painful moments, we are often more keenly aware of God's presence than when everything is sunshine and roses. The Psalmist wrote,

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, ["John,"](#) in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 146.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4, NASB95)

Guidance. Also, in John 14:2-27 is the promise of a teacher. Someone to inform and to guide our steps. To remind us of things forgotten and reveal truths not yet encountered. That is also part of the advocate’s role. Like “helper,” there is a multi-faceted experience within this role. Sometimes the Spirit reveals truth; either Biblical truth or the truth about a situation or truth about us. Other times He reminds us of things we learned, perhaps showing us a new or unexpected application to a truth. But always in this guidance, the Holy Spirit is pointing and prodding us towards Jesus.

Intercessor. The Advocate also stands between and intercedes for us. Paul wrote, *“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Romans 8:26–27, NASB95)* On this aspect or role, there is overlap with Jesus. John wrote, *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;” (1 John 2:1, NASB95)*

As believers, we don’t have one intercessor but two, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This one fact should inform our prayers. We don’t need to talk to God according to a formula or specific words or length of time. The intercession of the Holy Spirit fills in the gap between our expression and all else that is needed. Nothing wrong with praying specifically, it is in fact encouraged. But “God, HELP!” is also a highly effective prayer because the Holy Spirit intercedes in ways we don’t even know. Sometimes this intercession is simple advocacy, at other times it has more of a legal flavor.

There is a difficulty in explaining the legal side of this advocacy since we tend to relate it to our modern adversarial legal systems. A courtroom where there is a judge, a jury, a prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, and witnesses. We know from Jesus’ own trial that ancient legal systems were very different. But whether it is like the raucous hearing before Pilate, the confrontational hearing before the Jewish Ruling Council, the private testing of Herod, or the accusing words of Satan – we have the best legal representative ever in our corner through Jesus – the Holy Spirit.

Here are the beauty and grace of the whole. No matter where we are at or what we need, the Holy Spirit is there to comfort, encourage, teach, guide, remind, and intercede for us. Today we may need His peace, tomorrow His intercession as we confess sin, the next day His guidance. Or, more likely, we need all of the above each day of our walk with Jesus. We do have an advocate helper and a mighty one at that.

Power

One word commonly linked with the Holy Spirit is power. Jesus promised His disciples, *“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8, NASB95) The problem, however, is that our experience with power skews and twists our expectations of the Holy Spirit.

In our common everyday experiences, we are either the master of power or its victim. With a turn of a key or the flip of a switch, we control power. The power we employ magnifies our abilities. With the aid of a small tractor, I can do more than my own muscle could do. But power is also dangerous and can be abused. This is true of the real power of engines and electricity as well as the intangible power of governments, employers, and those in positions to exercise domination and control.

From those experiences, Christians tend to either seek to control the power of the Holy Spirit or seek to avoid that power entirely. Both are wrong. One is operating out of pride and the assumption that works of power confirm their standing with God. The other is operating out of fear or ignorance of that power.

The Holy Spirit is powerful and does release that power through people. Even Jesus experienced that connection. Peter’s sermon to the gentiles noted, *“You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”* (Acts 10:38, NASB95) And Paul prayed for believers, *“that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,”* (Ephesians 3:16, NASB95) But here we must also be careful.

One vital ingredient is missing – Why does the Spirit move with power? The answer is found in the verses already quoted. In Acts 1:8, it is the power to witness. In Jesus ministry, it was the power to do good and to heal. In Ephesians the power of the Spirit is *“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,”* (Ephesians 3:17, NASB95) The Spirit empowers to touch the world around us and to anchor us more fully and completely to Jesus. He does not empower folks to show off, to claim special anointing, to hold sway over people, or anything that puts the spotlight on us.

A better way to see the empowering of the Holy Spirit is as a piece of copper wire. That piece of wire is powerless yet connected in the right way fantastic power flows through it. So, who gets the praise and thanks? The piece of copper wire or the power generation plant? Obviously, the power plant. But if that copper wire should break, then no power flows even though the powerplant is still producing.

You could say it this way. Our purpose as followers of Jesus is all about connections. Staying connected with Jesus and connecting with others. As we do so, then the power of the Holy Spirit flows through us. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, we are unaware of that flow. Times when we say or do the right thing and don't even know it. Simply because we're connected to Jesus.

Even as I write this, I know and recognize that the power isn't in my words. Little I write can change a heart or a mind. But the power is in God's word as the Holy Spirit touches lives in ways I can't even imagine. Not because I'm someone special, I'm no more special than you are, but because these words serve as a bridge, a conduit, between God's heart and the hearts of others. My purpose is to make the connection, be obedient to the nudge of the Spirit, and get out of the way.

There are always going to be those who seek to wield and control power over people. Sometimes that takes the guise of political power, or the power of money, or even the power of religion. The power of the Holy Spirit is greater than all of these. *"You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."* (1 John 4:4, NASB95) But the Holy Spirit doesn't play their games or invest in their power struggles. He's not out to rule the world but to turn hearts in every tribe, tongue, and nation to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The power of the Holy Spirit is awesome. We are neither to control it for our own ends or fearfully avoid it but be a willing conduit and conductor of that power.

Gifts

A gift is a wonderful thing. Ideally, it is something we don't have, could really use, and didn't cost us any money, labor, or time to obtain. A gift is truly a free act of grace with no strings attached. In the Bible are several lists (Paul loved lists) which reveal some of the many and diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit given to those following Jesus.

For this article, we won't delve into the meaning, purpose, and operation of each gift. That would be a much longer article. We will instead focus on the variety of the gifts and one simple phrase – "as He wills."

Before we go too far, it is incumbent to recognize the divide between good-hearted believers when it comes to these gifts. The basic contention some hold is that the Holy Spirit has ceased giving certain gifts and others hold that everything in the lists is still offered "as He wills." The theological labels for these views are cessationism and continuationism. To be frank, I'm of the continuationism view, although I do not separate

myself from those who hold the other view. Whether you hold that the Spirit grants some or all, the basic tenet remains – the Holy Spirit gives gifts as He wills.

Paul's grand exposition on the gifts of the Spirit is found in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14. (Also see Romans 12:6-13 and Ephesians 4:11-13) The major issue Paul is addressing with the Corinthians was their propensity to elevate some of the gifts over others. Paul's concern was to allow the diversity of gifts within the unity of fellowship. The verses in Romans mentioned above have a similar context. Paul summarizes his point before unpacking it, *"But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills."* (1 Corinthians 12:11, NASB95)

There are four essential "gift lists." What could be called the manifestation gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:7-10. The operational gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:28. The equipping gifts of Ephesians 4:11-13. And the motivational gifts of Romans 12:6-8. Consider these to be like an artist's pallet, the basic colors, hues, and tones which are mixed in infinite variety and diversity. Some of these are lifelong gifts, some only operate for a season, others are only given as needed for a specific time and purpose. But they are all given as He wills.

That "squishiness" makes us uncomfortable. We like concrete expectations. That a McDonald's Big Mac will be the same whether it's purchased in Bangor Maine or Needles California (and anywhere in-between). We'd much prefer that given certain inputs on our part that the Holy Spirit would always respond the same way, with the same gifts and results. But the Spirit does not work that way.

In the same way, neither does a title confer gifts. For instance, not all pastors are the same, there is a wide variety of gifting. Some are more teacher like, some more compassionate, some more extrovert loving to visit with folks, some more serving oriented. Basically, the Holy Spirit doesn't care about our labels and is much more interested in the mix of colors He has gifted each individual. That was also Paul's point. There are a variety of gifts that, when they come together, create a wonderful picture, and fulfill a powerful purpose.

There are, of course, some warnings to heed. The Spirit gives gifts, but they can be unduly elevated, refused, or abused. Whenever we make one gift or some group of gifts more important, desired, or necessary, we fail to recognize how God is using others to also serve His Kingdom purposes. Likewise, when we refuse or deny His gifts, we ultimately devalue ourselves and others. And all the gifts are open for abuse, to be used in ways never intended or desired by God. Possibly even to excuse sin or to rob the wealth and dignity of others. Neither do any of the giftings prove our status, acceptance, anointing, or approval with God. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to meet His purposes, not ours.

Our often-repeated phrase is the bottom line – the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given as He wills. Our part is to receive them, recognize them in others, and employ them according to God’s direction and will. Exalting the giver and not the gift or ourselves. Doing so with humility instead of pride or jealousy. In short, receiving and employing the gifts of the Holy Spirit as He wills

Fruit

On my property are several kinds of trees. Most of them produce some kind of seed or fruit, the oak trees produce acorns, the black walnuts produce walnuts, the maples those single-bladed floating seeds, and the apple trees produce apples. Amazing. Give the simple ingredients of rich soil, water, and sunlight; they all grow and reproduce. Christians are supposed to be like that.

So far, we’ve covered several “inputs” of the Holy Spirit. The many ways that He helps, convicts, guides, and empowers believers in Christ. But the Bible also identifies a list of “outcomes” called the Fruit of the Spirit. Paul wrote, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”* (Galatians 5:22–23, NASB95)

Where the gifts are given “as He wills,” the fruit of the Spirit is without limit. All can be abundantly grown in our lives as we continue to walk with Jesus and embrace the many works of the Holy Spirit. The formula is simple. Want more peace? Grow roots into the rich soil of God’s word, revel in the sunshine of open-hearted prayer, drink deeply from all the Spirit offers, and the fruit will grow.

If we look at the list, really examine the variety of fruit as a whole instead of as distinct attributes, something pops out. The whole is the character of Jesus. Just like a tree produces fruit according to its kind, the Spirit is producing fruit in us according to our new life in Christ.

To understand the process of growing Jesus-like fruit, let’s look at John 15:4, *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.”* (NASB95) The picture in John 15 is that of a grapevine instead of the stand-alone trees pictured above. Want more fruit? Want better fruit? Abide in Christ.

But there are also times when God prunes the branches. Cuts away the distractions, the busy-ness, or a season of service now ending, all to improve our fruit. But pruning is never enjoyable at the time. All of this involves the Holy Spirit. The pruning requires His conviction. Abiding requires His connection and nudges as we navigate life.

Before we leave fruit, there is one more truth. Our lives *will* produce fruit like attitudes and characteristics. But what kind of fruit?

Prior to the Fruit of the Spirit passage in Galatians Paul wrote, “*Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” (Galatians 5:19–21, NASB95) As I look around my world, I see an abundance of this other kind of fruit – some of it in me. On the surface, the lists seem at odds. The one providing examples of outward actions, the other inward attitudes.

Just as the deeds of the flesh are visible and active, the fruit of the Spirit should also be visible and active. Not only should we enjoy the fruit of peace, for instance, but also give it to others. If our fruit isn’t visible, doesn’t impact the lives of others around us, is it really the fruit of the Spirit?

This is our journey with the Holy Spirit. To decrease and lay aside the fruit of the flesh, the world, and the devil and increase in the fruit of the Spirit by abiding in Christ.

The Holy Spirit and Us

The Holy Spirit is a gentleman. What I mean by that is He doesn’t just show up and force us to do something. He moves in our lives only to the degree we allow. But neither is He our servant bowing to our demands, expectations, or wishes. As such, it is incumbent on us to invite the Holy Spirit to move, to comfort, to convict, to empower, to help, to heal, to remind, and to guide. This invitation can be something as simple as “Come Holy Spirit.”

Inviting the Holy Spirit into our lives and fellowships is not a flippant request. In it, we are opening ourselves up to move as He wills, but not beyond it. We must recognize that not everything said and done in the name of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit’s doing. Paul wrote, “*Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil.*” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, NASB95) We are to neither to put a wet blanket over the Holy Spirit’s fire or embrace everything at face value. Yet those extremes seem to be the most common.

For some of the readers, experiencing the move of the Holy Spirit is foreign, strange, and perhaps a bit frightening. For others, it is the desired part of their personal and corporate worship. The key part of Paul’s instruction is to “examine everything.” For

those on the reluctant side, the encouragement is to step closer and invite the Holy Spirit to do as He wills. It is difficult to examine something from a distance. For those steeped in the moves of the Holy Spirit, examine everything. Discerning of spirits is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Goosebumps and spine chills are not always spiritual in origin. If the words, visions, and works do not glorify and point to Jesus, then it may be a different spirit at work. (see 1 John 4:1-3)

No matter where we are on the spectrum of experiencing the Holy Spirit, our expectations become like blinders put on horses to keep them focused on the road ahead. The greater reality is that the Holy Spirit is moving outside of our vision and expectations. Even in churches where the gifts are not welcome or expected, the Spirit moves. Perhaps the sermon hits a particular heart wound, hope, or need – that is a move of the Holy Spirit. Maybe a worship song moves us in some way – that is a work of the Holy Spirit. It could be that an off-the-cuff remark addresses a deep concern, or a prayer hits a hidden worry – that is the Holy Spirit.

For those of us acclimated to the Holy Spirit, we too can have blinders. Our experiences seemingly limiting the ways the Holy Spirit moves. If this or that happens, then the Spirit was here. If certain things don't happen, then we somehow missed God. But that is not true. When we open ourselves and our worship services to the Holy Spirit, He does move. The question is whether we will look beyond the limitations of our expectations.

Even in this discussion, our expectation has been limited. For you see, the consideration above is narrow. It seems to only expect the Spirit to move during times of personal and corporate worship. But that is also limiting the Holy Spirit. He wants to move in us when we're at work, on the road, at play, in the market, when online, and at home. "Come Holy Spirit" is just as needed in all of those places as it is at church or during our prayerful devotions.

The Holy Spirit desires to glorify Christ and bring all closer to Him and His Kingdom. Not only at church but in all aspects of our lives. Not only the "righteous" but all who have the heart to be moved, a conscience to be pricked, a will to be nudged, and a mind to be renewed. There's nothing more to add except to say this – Come Holy Spirit.

Chapter Seven – The Church

The word “church” may be understood in many different ways. For some, it is the building, whether the grand masonry of a cathedral, the wooden clapboard of a country church, or the something else. For others, it is an organizational structure, as in “The Church.” And yet there are a great many expressions of organization from the hierarchy of the high church to the impromptu gatherings of a few friends. The variety of experiences, expectations, and expressions of church is staggering and possibly confusing.

In this final section of *The Basics: A Readable Review of the Christian Faith*, we explore that entity called and known as “church.” Each one of us has a different church experience, and the goal of this section is to explore our similarities more than our differences.

My own personal experiences with church are filled with family and community. The small rural church of my childhood was and still is family. It was the church of my great-grandparents and grandparents. It was (and is) Evangelical in practice and Mennonite in heritage. There is a kinship and close caring of all who call that church home. Even now, there is a feeling of family and community whenever I visit. To me, that is what church is supposed to be regardless of all the other trappings involved.

Community was there the very first day of the church’s inauguration. Luke reports in Acts, “*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*” (Acts 2:1, NASB95) Pause here, for what happens next in Acts 2 is marvelous and captures all our attention. They had gathered together in one place. That expression of community is the very essence of church.

The importance of this one particular aspect of church cannot be overstated. Church is not the building or an organization to belong to. And not all gatherings of people are church.

They were all together in one place. They were community and family. A diverse group of individuals all sharing one common passion – their love of Jesus. And in a few moments that fledgling Acts Two community exploded with even more individuals from even more diverse backgrounds sharing that one commonality of belonging to Christ – of being family.

Jesus made an important promise, “*For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.*” (Matthew 18:20, NASB95) Church can be as small as two or three and as large as several thousand as seen in Acts 2. God moves in gatherings small and large, and everything in between. I’ve felt and experienced God in both the intimacy of a small group and the heaven-like worship of a 40,000 men

Promise Keepers event. Just as there is a variety of the size and shape of families, there is a variety of sizes and shapes of churches.

Gathering together is the basis of church. Not simply being in the same place at the same time but also being there with a sense of purpose, of belonging, and of community. It was and is so vital that the writer of Hebrew's warned, "*and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.*" (Hebrews 10:24–25, NASB95) But gathering is only the starting point of church. Everything that follows in this section flows from the reality of gathering together in the name of Jesus.

The Celebration

The word "church" may be understood in many different ways. For some, it is the building, whether the grand masonry of a cathedral, the wooden clapboard of a country church, or the something else. For others, it is an organizational structure, as in "The Church." And yet there are a great many expressions of organization from the hierarchy of the high church to the impromptu gatherings of a few friends. The variety of experiences, expectations, and expressions of church is staggering and possibly confusing.

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Sidebar – God’s Redemptive Work

While considering the wonderful, grace-filled, gift of salvation through Christ, we must come full faced with an important question. Can we lose our salvation? A question dividing Christians for hundreds of years into those saying, “no way, can’t happen” and those saying “yes, it can.” Both camps have produced mountainous volumes on why their view is right and the other wrong. Each has supporting scriptures to back up their view. In my view, both sides make good points and both sides make errors in application.

Now, there is no possible way for a 1200-word article to refute or acknowledge every argument on both sides. If we boil away the dross, we come down to two primary verses. One on the “can’t happen” side and one on the “yes it can” side. Both verses are clear and unambiguous.

On the “Can’t Happen” side - *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”* (John 10:27–30, NASB95)

On the “Yes It Can” side - *“For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.”* (Hebrews 6:4–6, NASB95)

So, we have a conflict. And not a minor one since the answer affects our attitudes, faith, and feelings of security in Christ. The problem is that to argue for or against either side, we must resort to hypothetical instances. What if someone does XYZ? God, however, doesn’t deal in hypotheticals but works inside those unseen places of our lives; our soul, our heart, and our intentions. As God said to the Prophet Samuel, *“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* (1 Samuel 16:7, NASB95)

There is no magical glow that announces our eternal condition for all to see. Many say and do the right things, but do not really belong to Jesus. And there are many whose lives fall far short of God’s desires, who struggle with addictive sin, but who truly are His. We cannot judge the outward appearance since that judgment is faulty. So, hypotheticals are nearly useless since only God and (to a lesser degree) each individual can say what is in their heart.

I think there is room for both camps, but we do need to recognize that there is no certain singular answer to this thorny question. While Christians may argue about it, this should not be a point of division. My personal belief is that it is possible to “lose salvation,” but it is very, very difficult and highly intentional. In other words, salvation can’t be lost like a set of keys or a coin slipping from our pocket, but it can be rejected and renounced like citizenship or family membership. But where and when that line is crossed is ultimately up to God.

No one can snatch you out of God’s hand. No one can steal God’s gift of grace from you. There is security there. All of our sins – past, present, and future are covered in Christ. Yet, Jesus’ lambs desire to turn from sin and towards Him. We are secure but staying within that security is up to us.

We all struggle against sin. And sometimes everyone, even the most mature believer, stumbles. Salvation doesn’t rest on our personal sinlessness, but on our belief in Jesus and our desire to follow Him. Neither are we to use God’s grace as an excuse or as a

“get out of jail free” card. That moment we think, “I can do this because God will forgive me,” we are on the precipice of falling from His hand.

Are we eternally secure in Christ? Yes. Can we walk away from that security? Yes, although it is extremely difficult and is completely intentional. Can we fall into sin and still be saved? Yes, because our sins are forgiven in Christ (even those we don't yet see). Even if we intentionally sin claiming God's forgiveness in advance? Yes, but that is a path which will lead us out of God's hand. Go that way often enough and every bit of our heart will be turned away from God with no path back.

For those struggling with a sinful addiction, I want to leave you with hope. If you've turned your life over to Jesus, you are secure in Him. You may fall into that sin many times yet. That's not God's desire, but it is possible. Falling is not the end of the story. Running away from God is. As long as you get up, run back to God, confess your sin, and lean on 1 John 1:9, He will forgive you. He will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. You *will* experience freedom from that sin in Christ. Sometimes He does that overnight, but sometimes He takes us on a longer road.

For those not struggling with a sinful addiction – yes you are. It's just not one of the socially unacceptable or “big” addictions. You may not fall victim to drugs, alcoholism, gambling, or sexual addiction. But you may be addicted to pride, to gossip, to judgmentalism, to legalism, to self-centeredness, etc. Those are just as damning, and every bit as much of a prison – even more so since those prison bars are nearly invisible. We all have a sin addiction. Each one of us is only righteous because of God's grace.

Like I said earlier on, it is not possible to cover all of the arguments and “if, and, or buts” of the theological positions held by various camps. I can hear them rumbling around in my head saying “but what about...” The real conversation which needs to happen is between each one of us and the Holy Spirit. Paul said, “*The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God,*” (Romans 8:16, NASB95) It is also the Holy Spirit which convicts us of our sin, including the deep-seated sins we may not even know about yet. We all need that open-hearted conversations with the Holy Spirit – both for the assurance of security and for the conviction of sin.

The Fellowship

Following the coming of the Holy Spirit and Peter's sermon in Acts 2 we are told, “*They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” (Acts 2:42, NASB95) In those simple actions are strong threads of relationships that bind us to one another and to God.

Growth in the early church was not an accident. All the members were intentionally and persistently perusing these things. This was not like a five-minute daily devotion but a consuming desire. In many ways, it is like being in love with someone, there is a passion to be with them and to hear their voice. For those first followers of Christ, this passion was expressed in four ways, all of which required time, vulnerability, and relationships.

Those first followers devoted themselves to the Apostle's teachings. Teaching, the exposition and application of God's word, is an integral part of church. When a church loses the centrality of teaching and applying God's Word, they have become less than what God intends. And yet, teaching takes many forms. The exposition of the Word, the modeling of our lives, the humble attitude of mutually searching and desiring God in open-hearted discussion are all forms of teaching.

Those first followers also devoted themselves to fellowship. They enjoyed connecting with each other and grew cords of relationships. If there is one aspect lacking in the modern church, it is true and deep fellowship. We may connect with a few on Sunday morning, but how many do we really know at a personal level. If we left that church, how many would remain connected with us? Or is our only link of relationship those few moments we share on Sunday Morning? Mia Culpa, I'm not any better at developing fellowship than the next person and sometimes feel kind of unconnected after church. I wonder how many others feel that way?

Fellowship, however, requires time. It thrives on transparency and allowing love to cover a multitude of offenses. In my experience, small groups are great for growing this kind of fellowship. But not the kind of small group where one person does all the talking but those where each voice is heard and welcome. Where each person is cared for and cares for others. That is fertile soil for deep fellowship. Small group involvement costs us the two things we hold most dear – our time and our heart.

Those first followers devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. It is unclear if Luke means Communion or table fellowship over a meal. Let's go with both since both build relationship and connectedness. Communion keeps our relationship centered on Christ instead of any other commonalities two people may share. Table fellowship encourages relationship. Simply enjoying a meal with someone breaks down walls and builds bridges. It's special when someone invites you to go out or when they come over for dinner.

Lastly, the first followers devoted themselves to prayer. We don't know exactly what kind of prayer, so let's just agree that it was all kinds. Prayers of thanksgiving, of petition, of repentance, of asking for the Kingdom to break in (thy kingdom come), of comfort, of worship, and so many others. But I also believe this also includes personal prayer for each other. Those caring prayers for one another also build meaningful relationships. Especially when the prayer is offered with the person at that moment.

Perhaps these are the marks of a healthy, vibrant, growing gathering of followers of Jesus. That devotion, persistently striving to learn from God's word, a deep fellowship which transcends a Sunday morning greeting, breaking bread with one another (even those outside our usual clique) and praying to God and for each other bind us to Jesus and one another. There are other marks of a healthy church, but they all flow from these four in some way.

And here is where things become challenging. We are acclimated to going places and passively receiving an experience. But that only goes so far when the church gathers. If everyone sits around waiting for someone else, then none of these will happen. It is incumbent on each one of us to initiate, to start the ball rolling (easier for some, harder for others). All of these require participation - applying the teaching of God's Word to our lives, reaching out to fellowship, inviting someone to join in a meal, and praying for each other. They all take time, effort, transparency, vulnerability, and humility. But the reward of relationship, spiritual growth, and extending the Kingdom is worth it all.

The Unity and Diversity

There is an inherent tension in the church between unity and uniqueness. This tension reveals the church's greatest strengths and its greatest challenges. We'll explore both in turn before examining those strengths and challenges. But at the outset let's glance ahead and recognize that both truths are to be embraced as we do church.

Jesus prayer for his disciples shortly before His arrest asked, in part, for unity. *"I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity."* (John 17:23a, NASB95) Early in Acts there are indications of unity such as *"These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers."* (Acts 1:14, NASB95) This unity is marked by love for one another.

Unity contains thoughts of sameness, mutuality of honor and acceptance, and the passion of everyone pulling in the same direction. There is agreement with one another in unity, and humility when disagreements bubble to the top.

Humans strive after unity in many ventures. This manmade unity is different than that of the church as it is built on performance and not on love. In manmade unity the needs of the group outweigh the needs of the individual to the point of sacrificing members to maintain its power. The way of Christian unity is not the world's way towards unity.

Christian unity is based on love of Christ and love of one another. It's more like family unity than that found in armies, businesses, social clubs, and political parties. That

difference leads us to the second side of our equation of tension, the uniqueness's found within the church.

Within the church are people. Each one a unique blend of character, experiences, abilities, gifts, and hang-ups. Paul likens these differences to the parts of a body. *“For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body.”* (1 Corinthians 12:14–15, NASB95) Each person brings value to the whole in some way, some more obvious than others.

Most churches recognize some degree of variation among its members. But the real question is scope – how broad of a spectrum of differences does God expect. For some churches the acceptable scope is limited to variations within a type, everyone is expected to be a foot of different shapes and sizes. But if an ear shows up, watch out. I hope you get the picture. This narrowing of scope creates a pseudo-unity. We feel unity because we're alike, but it misses the mark.

By standard measures a broadly scoped church doesn't feel unified, but it can be. It all comes down to what we do with the differences. Are they accepted simply as a mark of how broad-minded we are? Are they ignored and boiled down to a sub-set of agreement? Or are they accepted and integrated into the church body as a whole?

Let's make this personal for a moment. I have a friend at the Vineyard Church Peoria who is my polar opposite in many respects. I could go down the list of personality, temperament, giftings, and political leanings to find that in each one we are vastly different. So, I can ignore and in some way discard all the differences and center on the one point of commonality – our love of Jesus – and go on with life. All the while feeling kind of superior and big-hearted. Or we can embrace the differences between us and use them to see things beyond our view and grow in ways impossible on our own.

This often means accepting more than one answer and diving head first into the pool of reality. Sometimes it means compromise and finding ways forward that incorporates multiple viewpoints. Often it means allowing love to cover a multitude of perceived offenses and sin. But inside of that is a humble unity which doesn't require likeness but welcomes our differences.

But there is one piece missing. You see, diversity for diversity sake isn't the answer. In all of this there is one common center – Jesus Christ. We are unified in our love of Jesus. Everything flowing towards and from that common center. This Christ centered unity with diversity is what separates churches from social clubs, service organizations, and gatherings of friends. As Jesus said, *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:35, NASB95)

Equipping

One of my grandfathers was an auto mechanic. For a while, he ran his own garage in Goodfield. Then, he went to work at a larger business in Eureka and specialized in front-end work and alignments. Lastly, he worked at Caterpillar, fixing whatever they threw at him. That was his job, fixing things. I kind of followed in his footsteps but in different ways. While the church is sometimes like that – fixing brokenness – its real purpose is something grander.

Paul laid out this purpose in Ephesians 4. But first a word of direction. Don't get hung up on the titles and offices or think that because you're not "one of them" that God doesn't use you. Paul wrote, *"And He (Jesus) gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."* (Ephesians 4:11–13, NASB95) While we all need some "fixing" at times, the church's grander function is to equip and buildup folks towards unity and Christlike maturity.

The church is there to address brokenness through the Cross of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We all need that, we all have broken areas which need forgiveness and healing. I want to make sure we understand that equipping doesn't replace fixing but goes beyond it. However, if all we do is get fixed or only come around when we're broken, then we're missing out on the grander part of church.

At its very core, equipping means to help one another apply Biblical truths in all aspects of life. This equipping happens through five activities. Sometimes these functions are defined as offices, but they can also be momentary enabling's of the Spirit. The "apostles" are the sent ones. Those folks God sends into our lives at unlooked-for places and times for a variety of reasons. The "prophets" are the hearing ones relaying a word from God in the form of a scripture verse or a special word. Sometimes without even knowing it. Those messages could be corrective, directive, or encouraging. The "evangelist" reminds us of God's good news and is always pointing us back towards Jesus. The "pastor" is the comforting one, helping us stay in the flock and on the path. The "teacher" is the building one, providing a foundation of truth the others build upon.

For a long time, these activities have been reserved for only the select few. The professionals and leaders; the titled and ordained. And there is room for that, God does call and equip folks for servant leadership within the body of the church. But here's where we get it backward. Often the leader is equipped by the congregation, imbued with a title and expected to do all (or most) of the works of service and ministry. That's directly contradictory to the verses above from Ephesians 4.

Instead, the leaders, take the responsibility to equip and husband (in the sense of gardening) folks into works of service and ministry while advancing towards unity and maturity. In this sense, church leadership is not a “let me do it for you” role, but a “let me show you how so you can do it to” role.

In some ways, this equipping ministry is a lot like parenting and doing chores. Yes, mom and dad could wash the dishes faster and cleaner than the children. While having the kids do the dishes may be frustrating at times, it teaches them valuable lessons on the value of work and family responsibility.

In this respect, church becomes more of a training ground than a repair shop. I’ve learned this the hard way, you don’t need a title to be someone of value in the kingdom. All you really need is a heart to love others through service, humility to always be learning and growing in Christ, and a willingness to follow those Holy Spirit nudges.

If I were to put an expectation on doing Bible-based church it would look like this. Church is a gathering together of uniquely gifted and shaped folks on a faith journey towards loving God and truly loving one another. That’s church. That’s the common expectation of all Christ-centered congregations. But from that central expectation is a vast diversity of ways which are shaped by history, beliefs, the prevailing culture outside the walls, and the winds of the Holy Spirit.

The goal of this section of The Basics was to avoid the comfortable pride accompanying our familiar ways of doing church. It’s easy to think that we’re the only ones doing it mostly right and others are missing it somehow. Oh, the blindness of pride which elevates our successes and blinds us to our failures. I may be uncomfortable with another church’s ways, but I’ve found that those others also love Jesus. We truly are one body with a variety of expressions. One body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (see Ephesians 4:1-6). A diverse orchestra of churches following Jesus. Each one adding their unique voice in harmony with one another. Not as competitors of one another but as completers of one another in Jesus Christ – our all in all.

A Final Note

Everyone who endeavors to create, regardless of the medium, has to put down the pen, brush, instrument, or keyboard and proclaim completion. This long series I've called *The Basics: A Readable Review of Christian Faith* is no exception. There are perhaps hundreds of Biblically "basic" topics which are not yet on the canvas. But these which we have covered are the foundational roots upon which everything else rises. As such, even in its imperfections, we finish this series.

In a sense, our faith is complete, yet we are always growing and maturing into our life in Christ. These basics are completed yet there is much more to discover and apply. In music there is a longing to resolve as the song ends. To land on the note that feels like completion. Sometimes though, the songwriter or musician chooses to leave the song unresolved, to end the song in tension. It's a way of saying the song is complete but not yet finished.

If there was a way to complete *The Basics* with that feeling, with just the right word that retains the tension I would write it. For you see, the last note of this series is up to the reader to produce. How will you resolve the faith truths of this series? What will you do with the information? How will you respond to its encouragements? The notes you bring will resolve this series to completion.