

The Nature of God

A Bible Study
Written for Mormons

by Suzanne Heninger

Purpose: This study is designed especially for Mormons who are interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the traditional Christian view of God.

I would like to give special thanks
to the people who have taught me
and walked with me,
especially

Bob & Karen Brunson,
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and Pat Henderson.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated,
are taken from the LDS edition of the
Authorized King James Version of the Bible.

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About the Author

Who am I and why did I write this book? I think those are fair questions to ask.

I'm a 5th generation Mormon on every branch of my family tree. My ancestors drove covered wagons and pulled handcarts, some were in the ill-fated Martin handcart company. They were bodyguards for Joseph Smith and played in the Nauvoo band. My ancestors came from England and New England, Kentucky, Ohio, Sweden, Denmark, and one from Australia. Each heard the gospel preached by Mormon missionaries and left their homes to journey to Utah. I inherited a legacy of faith.

I've spent many years studying Mormonism – Mormon history, Mormon doctrine, and Mormon culture. I've taught Gospel Doctrine classes, Relief Society, Primary, and early morning Seminary. I've always had a great desire to know who I was and what I believed.

I've also spent considerable time the past few years studying traditional Christian theology. That is a wide field: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant – with all its many denominations. My focus has been on Evangelical Protestant theology, with emphasis on its roots in the Reformation. After a lot of study and prayer, this is what I have chosen as my faith. I believe it is what the Bible teaches. I believe it is where God has led me and where He wants me to be. I believe it is the truth about God. I have discovered a new relationship with God and faith in God that I had never known before.

I respect my heritage and I'm grateful for it. I respect the millions of Mormons (including my family and friends) who believe in that heritage. But I have to follow my faith. My pioneer ancestors followed their faith. They left everything they had known. They were willing to journey halfway around the world for what they believed. They desired to share their beliefs with others.

My husband and teenage children have not joined me on my journey. They are Mormon, so I attend both churches every Sunday – Sacrament Meeting at our Mormon ward with my family and Church of the Apostles, a non-denominational Christian church. I speak both languages.

If you've ever picked up an anti-Mormon book, you know how wrong it can be – facts wrong, interpretations wrong, tone is often angry. It's hard even for well meaning people to write about Mormonism because they don't understand it.

Similarly, few Mormons really understand what non-LDS Christians believe. They think it's pretty similar, except for Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon and modern prophets. We use the same words and read the same Bible, but there are a lot of differences, especially concerning the nature of God.

My desire is to help non-LDS Christians understand Mormonism – and to help Mormons understand what traditional Christianity believes. No real communication takes place until we understand each other.

This book is not intended to explain Mormonism. It's written for Mormons.

This book is intended to explain traditional Christian beliefs with an understanding of where Mormons are coming from, what issues are important to them, and how they use the scriptures and vocabulary that are part of both faiths.

You might be reading this because you're questioning Mormon theology. You might be reading it because you have Protestant family or friends and you want to understand what they're thinking. You might be reading it just for interest's sake to learn what others believe. You might be reading it as a way to increase your faith – like learning another language increases your understanding of your mother tongue. I certainly have a deeper understanding after seeing the contrast between these two faiths.

Craig Blomberg and Stephen Robinson co-authored a book entitled "How Wide the Divide?" They tried to determine how significant the differences are between Mormon and Evangelical beliefs. It's hard to answer that question unless we understand both sides.

So I hope my Mormon reader will spend a little time with me and consider traditional Christian theology and what it means to people who have grown up in that world and hold those beliefs.

I've designed this book as a "Bible Study". It's a workbook where you study the scriptures and answer thought provoking questions about them. The questions ask what you personally believe. No one is checking your answers to see if they're "right" or "wrong". You're welcome to use the questions (or not use them) in the way that works for you. It also provides space for you to write your thoughts as you're reading.

I encourage you to look up the verses in your Bible. That gives you a chance to study them more fully in the context of the whole chapter and historical setting.

Mormons and Evangelical Christians share many beliefs about what Christ did. We both believe in His virgin birth and perfect life, that He performed miracles, healed the sick, and taught His disciples the gospel. We both believe that He died on the cross to atone for our sins, was resurrected the third day, and ascended into heaven.

But our beliefs differ on who Christ is, who God the Father is, and who we are. To paraphrase the favorite Mormon questions, we could ask:

Who is God?

What is my relationship with God?

Where did I come from and where am I going?

This Bible Study will look at the traditional Christian answers to these questions.

Introduction

Take a few minutes to think about your life. What things are most important to you?

What is the purpose of your life?

In John 17:3 we read: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

That would imply that the ultimate purpose of life is to know God. What does knowing God mean?

Consider your relationship with another person. How difficult is it to relate to that person if you know nothing about them?

Let's say someone asks you to e-mail their friend Bob. You know nothing about Bob. What would you say? You might start by introducing yourself and hoping Bob will do the same. You might form a mental image of Bob – he's over 6 feet tall, late 20s, athletic. Say in fact, Bob is in his late 70s, a smaller man, who loves to read, with a wonderful sense of humor and much accumulated wisdom. How you think of Bob will affect your relationship with him.

This is true in our relationship with God as well. Although the goal is to know God personally, we need to have a correct understanding of who He is in order to do that.

The nature of God has been a topic of great dispute throughout human history. What is God?

- a block of wood fashioned by human hands that we pray to
- an invisible, impersonal force that fills the universe
- the “big bang” – the scientific beginning of the universe
- a group of beings superior to us who interfere in our lives (like the Greek & Roman gods)
- a vengeful tyrant who sends grief and war on the human race
- a psychological power in your subconscious
- a doting Santa Claus who grants wishes if we’ve been good

Take a minute and write your understanding of what God is like:

What caused you to believe the things you believe about God? Is it through personal experience, scripture study, things you were taught at home or at church? Were there any significant moments that really shaped your belief?

The goal of this Bible Study is to explore the traditional Christian understanding of the nature of God. You may find it’s what you believe. You may find it’s quite different. You may accept or reject it. But it is hard to make an intelligent decision about something before you understand it.

In Acts 17:11, Paul and Silas preached to the people in Berea and the people “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”

I hope that you will search the scriptures with me, prayerfully, as you consider these words.

I. God in Creation

There are 4 main ways that we learn about God:

1. Through God's creation
2. Through the Bible – God's word given through His prophets and apostles
3. Through Jesus' life
4. Through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost

Can we really learn about God through creation? Is it a reliable witness?

Psalm 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork."

Romans 1:18-20: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse."

These verses say that creation teaches us of God. In fact, creation leaves us with no excuse if we do not believe.

What can we learn about God when we look at the millions of stars in a clear night sky?

What can we learn about God as we see the tiny veins in a flower petal?

What can we learn about God from the incredible varieties of birds and animals?

What can we learn about God from the heights of the mountains?

What can we learn about God from the force of a hurricane?

What can we learn about God as we ponder the depths of the ocean?

Why do these things teach us anything about God?

Because God created them. It's like learning about an author by reading his book or an artist by studying her work.

The Gospel of John begins: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3).

"The Word" is Jesus. God created all things through Jesus. God is big enough to create every star, yet detailed enough to create things so tiny we can't even see them. God created the earth with incredible variety, but each thing working together as part of His plan.

Luke 12:6: "Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?" Luke 12 also tells us how God feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies of the field. God is very personally involved in even the smallest details of His creation.

Sometimes we feel closest to God in nature amongst His creations. They speak of the power and goodness of God.

What does it mean when we say that God is the Creator? Which set of statements best describes your understanding of God:

- God is the creator of our earth.
- God works within natural laws, but He can understand and use them in ways we cannot.
- God organized our earth from existing matter.
- Man's intelligence is co-eternal with God.
- God is omnipotent, which means He is as powerful as He can be.

Or:

- God is the creator of heaven and earth – which means He created ALL things.
- God created the laws of nature and He has full power over them.
- God created matter from nothing.
- There was a time when there was only God. Nothing else is co-eternal with Him.
- God created man. There was a time when we did not exist.
- God is omnipotent, which means all powerful.

Or you're welcome to write an alternative definition:

One of the most fundamental beliefs in traditional Christianity is that God is the Creator of ALL things – the ultimate Creator. Nothing came before God. Nothing is co-eternal with God. God created matter “ex nihilo” which means “out of nothing”. God created the laws of nature. God created people and angels. God created the heavens and the earth. God spoke and they came into being. God is dependent on nothing, but all things are dependent on God for their creation and their continued existence.

Genesis 1:1,3: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. ... And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”

Colossians 1:16-17: “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.”

Acts 17:27-28: “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being”

What is the difference between a God who has created ALL things and a God who organizes pre-existing things?

Even many non-religious people define the word “God” as the ultimate source of existence, of life, the beginning point, the ultimate Creator.

If God organized pre-existing matter and followed pre-existing laws, then who created them?

If you say they have always existed, then you have no ultimate Creator. You have defined a universe with a being higher than us and called him God, but you have no Creator God.

Traditional Christianity teaches that God created ALL things.

There are many important questions we ponder as we think about the nature of God:

What does it mean when we say that God is omnipotent (all powerful)?

What does it mean when we say that God is omniscient (all knowing)?

Can I surprise God?

Does God live in space and time like we do or does He live outside them?

Does God the Father have a physical body? If not, what is He?

Is God like us or very different from us?

What does God care about?

What is our relationship with God?

To find the answers to these questions, we turn to the Bible. The Bible is the story of God's relationship with and revelations to His people. It is God's testimony of Himself, preserved through divine power, so that we might know Him.

II . God in History

The word “History” can be separated into “His story”. It is the story of God’s work among men and women on earth.

What was God’s relationship with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall?

What was God’s relationship with Adam and Eve after the Fall?

God cursed the earth because of their sin. Their sin separated them from the presence of God. But God gave them a promise, recorded in Genesis 3:15. As He cursed the serpent, He said: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

Modern translations like the New International Version (NIV) read: “he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” The footnote in the LDS edition of the Bible clarifies that the Hebrew word actually means “crush” or “grind”. There’s an important difference between “bruise” and “crush”. It’s not an even battle between God and Satan. The child of the woman (Jesus) will crush the serpent (Satan).

The Bible tells us that God had a plan from the foundation of the world.

1 Peter 1:19-20 describes how we are redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.”

And in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:34, the chosen are told: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

But the Old Testament gives no indication that Adam or Abraham or Moses fully understood God’s plan. It does not record the gospel being given in its fullness and lost completely and restored multiple times. The Old Testament tells of God revealing His plan in a gradual, step by step process. Even Christ’s disciples did not fully understand God’s plan until Christ explained it to them after His resurrection (Luke 24:44-48).

Let's look at God's revelation of His plan through history:

We've already talked about Genesis 3:15, God's promise to Adam and Eve.

As God continued to reveal His will, He made covenants with His people. The first recorded covenant was with Noah when God promised never again to destroy the whole earth by flood (Genesis 9:8-13).

God promised Abraham both land for an inheritance and descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. God promised Abraham that the Messiah would be one of his descendants, saying in Genesis 12:3: "and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham "believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." This covenant was renewed with Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob.

God led Jacob's family to Egypt, where they multiplied greatly, but eventually came into slavery. God allowed this so He could show His power and glory as He delivered them and created a chosen people for Himself.

Moses was an example of the Deliverer, the Messiah, who would come to deliver God's people from a bondage greater than Egypt, from the bondage of sin and death.

When Moses asked to know God's name, he was given the answer: "I AM WHO I AM" or just "I AM" (Exodus 3:14) – a declaration of God's eternal and sovereign nature.

In the plagues of Egypt, God demonstrated His power over the pagan gods the Egyptians worshipped. Moses' rod became a snake, the symbol of ruling power in Egypt. God demonstrated His power over the Nile River, over disease, over crops and animals, over darkness, and over death. Pharaoh called his wise men and sorcerers and magicians, but they could not protect Pharaoh and Egypt from these plagues.

In the last plague, God commanded each Israelite family to kill a lamb and smear the blood above the door and on the doorposts so their firstborn child would not die. Exodus 12:13 says: "and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you."

What did God teach the children of Israel through the Passover?

On the simplest level, they learned to rely on the Lord for protection, but it was very significant that the protection came through the blood of a lamb. The people were commanded to celebrate the Passover each year to remember what the Lord had done.

As the children of Israel journeyed in the wilderness, God gave them commandments for how they should live as God's chosen people. God also instructed them to build a tabernacle. The Bible contains 50 chapters describing the tabernacle, beginning with Exodus 25-30.

Why was the tabernacle so important?

The tabernacle was a picture to teach the people of God.

Each sacrifice pointed to the Messiah who would be the final and ultimate sacrificial lamb. There were sin offerings and guilt offerings to make atonement for the people, burnt offerings and fellowship offerings for worship, and grain offerings to thank God for His provision. Everything had to be sprinkled with blood to consecrate it: the people, the priests, the scrolls, the furnishings, and the tabernacle itself (Hebrews 9:19-22). The priests could not enter unless they had been washed and sprinkled with blood, just as we enter heaven only through the sacrifice of Christ's blood for us.

The tabernacle contained the table of shewbread with 12 loaves of unleavened bread. The bread had to be unleavened because leaven represented sin. The Hebrew word for "shewbread" literally translates "bread of face" or "bread of Presence". It reminded the people of God's presence among them. Jesus used this image when He told the people: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). Jesus' body is similarly represented by bread in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The shewbread was eaten by the priests each Sabbath and replaced with new loaves (Leviticus 24:8-9).

The tabernacle also contained the lampstand with oil that burned continually, providing the only light, as Jesus is "the light of the world" (John 8:12). And it contained the altar of incense, which symbolized prayer, decorated with a crown and horns to show the power of God.

Everything was overlaid in gold to remind them of the glory of God, and the covering above the tabernacle was blue representing heaven.

Beyond the Holy Place, was the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant rested. Three things were kept in the Ark: the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments, Aaron's rod that bloomed showing that God can bring life from death, and a jar of manna reminding them of God's provision of everything they needed.

The lid of the Ark was made of pure gold topped with two cherubim. This was called the Mercy Seat. It represented the throne of God.

The tabernacle was always in the center of the camp. It was God's dwelling place in the midst of His people.

Even when the people sinned against God, God was teaching them. In Numbers 21, the people complained “and the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord ... And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (verses 6-8).

The children of Israel were healed by looking at the serpent on the pole. Jesus himself interpreted this symbol as He spoke to Nicodemus: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

The serpent represented sin. Jesus took our sin upon Himself and was lifted up on the cross, so that we might look to Him and live.

As God taught the people, He promised them over and over: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:12).

What did God promise to do for His people?

What did God ask the people to do in return?

Jeremiah 7:23: “But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.”

God wanted the people to obey Him and to trust Him. Time and time again, He demonstrated His miraculous power in saving His people:

- He gave Abraham a son when Abraham and Sarah were long past child-bearing age
- He brought Joseph to power in Egypt despite being sold as a slave and cast into prison
- He brought plagues upon Egypt until the Egyptians finally let God’s people go
- He parted the Red Sea when the Egyptian army pursued them
- He fed the children of Israel with manna in the wilderness and led them day and night
- He fought their battles for them as they conquered the promised land
- He defended them from their enemies whenever they put their trust in Him

God demonstrated His power through history. He taught His people through the tabernacle and the commandments of the Law. And He spoke to the people through prophecy, telling them of the Savior who would come.

Many, many scriptures could be quoted that prophesy of Christ's birth, life, miracles, and death. I am going to focus on four of them, found in Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Daniel 7, and Isaiah 42.

In Isaiah 53, the Messiah is referred to as a suffering servant:

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth” (verses 3-9).

Even the details – Jesus standing silently at his trial before Herod, being crucified between two thieves, and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, are included. And it is through His suffering that we are healed! Unlike the sacrificial lamb of the Law of Moses, which could only symbolize the atonement which was to come, Christ's sacrifice paid the debt in full once for all.

What does it mean when a debt is stamped “Paid in Full”?

Can anyone be asked to pay that debt again?

What did it cost Jesus to pay the debt for us?

Psalm 22 also prophesies of the Messiah. Jesus spoke the first verse of it as He hung on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

The psalm continues to describe His crucifixion in eerie detail: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture” (verses 14-18).

Read it again, noticing the details. This is a very accurate description of the physical agony of death by crucifixion. They even cast lots to divide His clothing.

But Psalm 22 does not end in agony and defeat. It continues in the very next verse: “But be not thou far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste thee to help me. ... For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard” (verses 19, 24).

Christ was quoting the opening verse of a psalm that ends with triumph and deliverance for those who trust in God!

The Old Testament prophecy Jesus quoted more than any other is found in Daniel 7:13-14. It reads: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.”

While Jesus was on the earth, He commonly referred to Himself as the “Son of man”. He was telling the people that He was the One God had been promising all this time.

Did the Jews understand that Jesus was claiming to be God?

How did they respond to His claims about His relationship with God?

In John 10:30-31, Jesus ends his preaching with the statement: “I and my Father are one.”

John tells us the people’s response: “Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him.”
Why would they try to stone Jesus for that statement?

Stoning was the punishment given in the Law of Moses for blasphemy, which is defined as claiming to be God or claiming to have the rights or attributes of God.

This was incredible blasphemy to the Jews of Jesus’ day. Moses specifically told them in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.” This verse, known as the “Shema”, became the Jewish confession of faith that was to be recited daily by the faithful.

The Jews believed in monotheism – ONE GOD.

Yet Jesus forgave sins and healed the sick and raised the dead and taught the people “as one that had authority” (Mark 1:22).

In Matthew 11, we read Jesus’ answer to the disciples of John the Baptist when they asked if he was the promised Messiah. Jesus answered: “Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them. And blessed is he, whomsoever will not be offended in me” (verses 4-6).

Jesus is quoting Isaiah 42: “Thus saith the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein: I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light unto the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house. I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (verses 5-8).

These verses are speaking of the Messiah. God, the Creator of heaven and earth, will send someone to fulfill His covenant to His chosen people and to be a light unto the Gentiles. This man will do these miraculous works. But God will not give His glory to someone else. This man will be one with God.

There are many verses that could be quoted to show that Jesus did indeed claim to be God. One of the most significant is at Jesus' trial before the high priest Caiaphas and the Jewish religious leaders. Many false witnesses were brought, but Jesus did not defend himself against their accusations. Finally Caiaphas evoked the authority of the high priest and commanded Jesus to answer. The scene is recorded in Matthew 26:63-66:

“But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God.

“Jesus saith unto him, Thou has said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

“Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying: He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy.

“What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death.”

The Jews knew well the prophecies that the Messiah would come to free them from bondage, but they thought it would be from bondage to the Romans, from physical and political bondage. They were not looking for God Himself coming to free them from spiritual bondage to sin and death.

Throughout the Gospels, we see continuing testimonies to Christ's divinity: His virgin birth, His baptism, His teachings and miracles, the Transfiguration, and ultimately Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Matthew 3:16-17 records Christ's baptism: “And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Perhaps the most magnificent demonstration of Christ's divinity, prior to the resurrection, was on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Matthew 17:1-2 records: “And after six days, Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart. And was transfigured before them; and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”

This wasn't light that came down from heaven like a beam of sunlight. This was light that came from within Jesus. His face shone as the sun through its own internal light.

Did His followers understand?

Jesus tried many times to explain to His disciples about His death. How did His disciples respond?

We know their response from what the Bible records:

Matthew 16:21-22: “From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him; and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.”

Matthew 26:56 records that when Jesus was arrested “all the disciples forsook him, and fled.”

Peter followed, but then denied Jesus three times during His trial before Caiaphas (Matthew 26).

Of the apostles, only John is mentioned at the cross when Jesus died, although the women are mentioned in all four gospels (John 19:26).

On Easter morning, the women went to the tomb and were told by angels that Jesus had risen. But when they told the apostles, “their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not. Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass” (Luke 24:11-12). The New International Version says “he went away, wondering to himself what had happened” (Luke 24:12 NIV).

Later in chapter 24, Luke tells us of Jesus’ first appearance to His disciples after His resurrection. Luke says “they were terrified and affrighted” (Luke 24:37). They did not understand.

Jesus appeared to His disciples, calmed their fears, showed them His hands and feet, and ate before them. Then He explained the gospel again: “And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:44-47).

It is only from this side of the cross, only after Jesus’ resurrection, that the full story God had been telling since the creation of the world became clear. God Himself would pay the price for our transgression – both Adam’s Fall and our personal transgressions.

Jesus was not a prophet, not a messenger, not God’s most important representative. Jesus was God.

III. The Trinity

Traditional Christianity believes in a view of God known as “The Trinity”.

The Westminster Confession is a statement of beliefs compiled by religious leaders in England in 1646. It is still extremely influential in Christian theology. It defines the Trinity as follows: “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.”

That is one of the hardest doctrines to understand – until you realize that God is not like us. God is not a man. God is not an exalted man. God is totally other.

God is the Creator, the ultimate Creator who created ALL things from nothing. Only God is eternal. Only God is uncreated. We are part of His creation.

God made this abundantly clear when Job questioned God about his suffering. God answered Job out of a whirlwind and compared the glory of God to our weakness for the next four chapters (Job 38-41). God asked Job: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. ... Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb? ... And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place? ... Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death? Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all” (Job 38:4,8,11,12,17,18).

Did Job respond: “I was right there with You in the pre-existence helping with creation” ?

Job’s response, recorded in Job 42:5-6 was: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Realizing the greatness of God had a PROFOUND impact on Job. He was thoroughly humbled. He accepted God’s will unconditionally. His human reasoning was nothing compared to God.

Isaiah responded in a similar manner when the Lord appeared to him and called him to be a prophet. He says he saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims ... and one cried unto another, and said, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory ... Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone” (Isaiah 6:1-5).

When we see the glory of God, we realize our own nothingness before God.

Have you ever had an experience where you realized how small you are compared to the physical world, perhaps looking at the stars or a storm or the ocean?

Have you had an experience where you realized how insignificant you are compared to the vast numbers of people on earth?

Have you ever had a problem or a challenge you were completely incapable of solving?

How small we are! How short our lifetime! How limited our influence!

Contrast that with the God who created the entire universe – every star and planet and galaxy, who created and knows every person and every hair on their head, and who is capable of solving every problem we have ever known.

The seraphim or angels Isaiah saw were crying out that God is “holy, holy, holy”.

What does the word “holy” mean?

The Hebrew language does not have words like “good, better, best”. When they want to emphasize something, they repeat it. The only thing in the Bible repeated three times are the words “Holy, Holy, Holy”. That is the ultimate!

Holy means more than good, more than spiritual. Holy means sacred, consecrated, set apart. A holy day is one that is different from the others (this is the origin of the word “holiday”). The “Holy Bible” is sacred, different from other books. When we dedicate a church, we consecrate it to be a holy place. The children of Israel were taught to keep the Sabbath day holy – set apart for the worship of God, different from the other 6 days of the week.

God's holiness is in comparison to all of His creation. God is holy, holy, holy. He is not part of creation, but outside it, separate and distinct from it. God is not limited by space or time. He does not exist in one location. All time is in the present to Him. We are finite, but God is infinite. We are created, God is the Creator.

The Godhead consists of three beings: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. All are eternal, all are God, all are One – not just one in purpose, but truly one. It's tempting to think of them as one God who can take three forms:

God the Father – God in heaven
God the Son – God as Jesus living as a man on this earth
God the Holy Ghost – God dwelling in our hearts

Alternatively, some people view them as three separate persons who are working together like a presidency or board of directors. But that is not how the Bible describes God. God has a complex unity. He is truly three and one at the same time. Remember, God is not like us.

The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost exist in relationship to each other. They enjoy love and fellowship and communion with each other within the Godhead. Human relationships mirror this relationship. Thus Jesus could pray to his Father without praying to himself. Yet Jesus repeatedly taught his followers that He was one with the Father.

John 10:30: "I and my Father are one."

John 12:44-45: "Jesus cried and said, He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me."

In John 14:6-11: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him. Philip saith unto him, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake."

What did Jesus tell Philip?

The Book of Mormon has some interesting comments on this subject. For example:

Mosiah 15:1-5: “And now, Abinadi said unto them: I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son – The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son – And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast out, and disowned by his people.”

Alma 11:38-40: “Now Zeezrom, saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last; And he shall come into the world to redeem his people; and he shall take upon him the transgressions of those who believe on his name; and these are they that shall have eternal life, and salvation cometh to none else.”

How do Abinadi and Amulek explain the relationship between God the Father and Jesus?

Jesus referred to Himself many times using “I Am”, which the Jews recognized as God’s name that He revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14) :

- “I am the living bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:51)
- “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12)
- “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11)
- “I am the resurrection, and the life” (John 11:25)
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)
- “I am the true vine” (John 15:1)

This is most clearly seen as a reference to the name of God in John 8:58: “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.”

The Bible never uses the word “Trinity”. It is thought that Tertullian, an early Christian theologian born around 160 AD, first used the word to speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

By 325 AD, the word was in common use. It was confirmed as the official doctrine of the church at the Nicene Council, which described Jesus as "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

The Bible clearly refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost all as God, and it clearly says that there is only one God.

If the atonement is amazing (and it is!), the incarnation is even more amazing. Jesus is not a man who was exalted to be part of the Godhead. He's not one of us who volunteered to take on the role of Savior. Jesus is God – truly God – who came to earth as a man. He veiled His glory and became fully man while also being fully God.

The Gospel of John begins by explaining this to us: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-4,14).

Paul explains this in his letter to the Philippians. I'm going to quote it in a couple of Bible translations since they help to clarify its meaning:

King James Version: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

New International Version: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8 NIV).

King James uses “made himself of no reputation.” NIV uses “made himself nothing.” Other versions translate it as “he emptied himself.” The Greek word is *kenóō* which literally means “to make empty.” Jesus set aside His glory and honor to come to earth and live here with us.

God - truly God - came as man in Christ. He was born as a human baby in the most humble of circumstances in Bethlehem. He lived a simple but perfect life, teaching and healing and fulfilling all the prophecies that had been made about Him. He died between two thieves on a cross as the final sacrificial lamb to atone for the sins of the world. And then He rose from the dead to break the bands of death.

As Jesus explained to his disciples before His death: “I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:17-18).

Only God has that kind of power!

Jesus promised His disciples that He would never leave them, yet He did leave and ascended up into heaven. But God did not leave.

Jesus explained this to his disciples in John 14: “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in me, and I in you. ... These things I have spoken unto you, being yet present with you. But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things unto your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (verses 16-20,26).

The Holy Ghost came upon Jesus’ disciples as promised after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, as recorded in Acts 2.

Jesus said: “I am in the Father, and ye in me, and I in you.” How can Jesus be in us?

Physically, he can’t. But the Holy Ghost, who is God just as Jesus is God, can dwell in us. God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are simultaneously three and one. They have different roles in the Godhead and different roles in salvation, but they are all one God.

Their roles in salvation can be summarized as follows:

God the Father - Initiates salvation through His plan because of His mercy and love towards those He has chosen.

Jesus - Saves and redeems us through His atonement and resurrection.

Holy Ghost - Convicts us of sin, making us aware of our need for salvation and leading us to accept Jesus as our Savior. Once we are converted, He is the guarantee of our salvation, and He teaches, comforts, and transforms us into new people in Christ.

How does this explanation of the Trinity compare with your current view of God?

IV. Image of God

The Bible says in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

What does the Bible mean when it says that we are created in the image of God?

Does it mean that we look like God?

Does God have a physical body?

In Romans 1, Paul warns: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men ... Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (verses 18,22-23).

Depicting God with an image of anything earthly is repeatedly condemned in the Bible. That includes depicting God in man's image.

But we have examples in the Old Testament of people seeing God . The theological word for that is a “theophany” or “Christophany”. It is a visible manifestation of God as a man or angel or in some other natural form.

Scholars debate what to include in a list of theophanies. A possible list is given below:

Genesis 3:8-9 - Adam and Eve walked and talked with God in the Garden of Eden.

Genesis 17:1-5 - God appeared to Abraham and established His covenant with him.

Genesis 32:22-30 - Jacob wrestled with God.

Exodus 3:4-6 - Moses saw God in the burning bush.

Exodus 13:21 - God led the children of Israel as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Joshua 5:13-15 - The commander of the Lord’s army appeared to Joshua and took command of the battle for Jericho.

Daniel 3:24-25 - Nebuchadnezzar threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fiery furnace, but then saw four men in the furnace and “the fourth is like the Son of God.”

God can and does appear in these forms. But it is idolatry when we try to limit God to any natural form.

1 Timothy 6:16 describes God as He “Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see.”

Colossians 1:15 describes Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.”

There’s an interesting example in Exodus 33. In verses 9-11, it tells us about Moses’ conversation with God: “And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door. And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.”

But in the same chapter, in the same conversation, Moses asks God: “I beseech thee, shew me thy glory” (verse 18). And God replies: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” (verse 20).

Did Moses talk to God face to face without seeing His face?

Obviously he did.

The Hebrew word used here is *paniyim*. It's the same word used for the shewbread in the tabernacle. It can mean either "face" or "presence". It is translated "presence" in Genesis 3:8 where Adam & Eve hide themselves from the presence [*paniyim*] of God, and also in Psalm 100:2: "Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence [*paniyim*] with singing." When we come before the face of God, we are in His presence, we are close to Him. Moses spoke with God "as a man speaketh unto his friend," with that kind of familiarity.

When we say we had a "heart to heart" talk with someone, we are speaking figuratively. Our heart doesn't literally think or speak. Similarly, if we claim we are "wrestling" with someone, we could mean we are rolling on the floor trying to flip them on their back or we could mean we are trying to get them to understand or cooperate. We often speak figuratively.

An "anthropomorphism" is where human characteristics are used to describe God.

A story is told of two Mormon missionaries who got permission to speak at a Baptist church. After having the congregation look up verse after verse after verse about God's hand and finger and arm, the pastor got up and asked his congregation to find one more verse – Matthew 23:37 where Jesus laments: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not?" The pastor closed his Bible and said: "There! Now God's a chicken!"

We understand that God is not a chicken. It's a simile – a comparison using "like" or "as". We learned about those in school. A comparison that doesn't use "like" or "as" is called a metaphor. It has the structure of a factual statement, but is really a comparison and is understood to be one.

Let's take a look at a few of these verses (emphasis mine):

Psalm 77:15: "Thou hast **with thine arm** redeemed thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph."

Isaiah 53:1: "Who has believed our report? and to whom is **the arm of the Lord** revealed?"

Exodus 15:6: "**Thy right hand, O Lord**, is become glorious in power: **thy right hand, O Lord**, hath dashed in pieces the enemy."

Judges 2:15: "Whithersoever they went out, **the hand of the Lord** was against them for evil ..."

God is described with wings in the same manner:

In Ruth 2:12, Boaz says to Ruth: "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, **under whose wings** thou art come to trust."

Psalm 57:1: "Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, **in the shadow of thy wings** will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast."

Psalm 91:2-4: “I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall **cover thee with his feathers**, and **under his wings** shalt thou trust; his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”

Malachi 4:2: “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing **in his wings**” [This verse is also found in 3 Nephi 25:2.]

Does God have arms, hands, and wings? Or are these descriptions using terms we understand?

The prophets struggled to describe the things they saw:

How do you describe the final judgments of God at the end of the earth?

How do you describe the glory of heaven?

How do you describe an infinite and invisible God?

How do you describe the glory of the resurrected Christ?

Paul was commanded not to write his vision of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Others, like John, were commanded to write, but their writing is highly symbolic because human language has no words to describe the glory of God.

John was one of the apostles. He was on the Mount of Transfiguration. He witnessed Jesus' death and resurrection. John refers to himself as the apostle “whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 20:2). How did John respond when he saw Jesus again in his vision on the island of Patmos? Did he run to embrace Jesus?

Like Job and Isaiah, he was overwhelmed. John records: “And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not...” (Revelation 1:17).

John describes Jesus' appearance: “And in the midst of the seven candlesticks was one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (Revelation 1:13-16).

John also gives us a picture of God on His throne: “And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. ... And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. ... And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:2-11).

What does John show us? We see God as the Creator who lives forever. We observe that God is worshipped. But John can give us only a hint of God’s power and glory. He uses images to describe this to us.

Jesus gives us an important insight into the nature of God in John 4:24 when He is speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. She asks whether they must go to Jerusalem in order to worship. Jesus answers: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” Modern translations more correctly translate it: “God is Spirit.”

What does that mean?

Jesus’ disciples were afraid the first time they saw Him after His resurrection. He assured them that He had truly risen from the dead and had a real, physical resurrected body. Jesus’ words are recorded in Luke 24:39: “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.”

Spirit is defined as being non-material.

God the Father does not have a physical body. God does not “have a Spirit”. His very nature is Spirit. He is not made of flesh and bones. He is not made from matter. He is not made at all. He is eternal and everlasting, existing outside of the universe and all created spheres.

God appears to people in ways we can comprehend – as a burning bush, as a pillar of cloud, in a whirlwind (Job), in a form like a man, in dreams and visions. God sends angels to deliver His messages. God communicates through the written word, through the Bible. And God communicates through the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

In our fallen state, we cannot know God unless He reveals Himself to us. All of our scientific exploration, all of our pondering and thought, all of our artistic expression, all of our humanistic studies will not teach us about God. But God has revealed Himself.

The most complete and perfect revelation of God to us is through Jesus Christ. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus has a physical body. He was born of the Virgin Mary and lived a physical life on earth with us. He ate, slept, worked, and experienced pain and sadness and hardship. Jesus died on the cross, was physically resurrected, and ascended into heaven with His physical body.

Matthew 1:23: "they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

Jesus, God the Son, has a physical body. God the Father does not.

Do we have any examples in the Bible of God the Father and Jesus appearing simultaneously, each with a physical body?

There is the Biblical concept of Jesus being on the right hand of God:

Acts 7:55-56 records Stephen's vision before he was stoned: "But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God."

Colossians 3:1: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God."

What does it mean that Jesus is on the right hand of God?

If you go back to the parable of Jesus dividing the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25), being on the right hand represented a place of honor and blessing, while being on the left hand represented disfavor and rejection.

The "Son of man" is Christ's title from Daniel 7:13-14. This is "the one to whom all authority would be given." These verses are referring to Jesus in the same manner. He's the one with all authority. He's the favored one on the right hand of God.

God is not like us, He is totally other. He is the Creator. He is Spirit. He is infinite. We are part of His creation.

But God has created us to share some of His attributes. Unlike the animals, who are also part of the physical creation, men and women are created “in the image of God.” Let’s look at what that means.

Christian theologians talk about the "communicable" and "incommunicable" attributes of God.

What does the word “communicable” mean?

Something that is communicable can be transmitted or given to someone else.

When Adam and Eve were created, God shared with them His communicable attributes. He gave them qualities like knowledge, wisdom, love, mercy, patience, goodness, and creativity. God has these attributes in absolute and perfect form. God is all knowing. We seek knowledge. But we are able to seek it because God created us in His image to have that ability. After the Fall, they are attributes we struggle to attain, but they are attributes that do grow in us as we gradually become the person God created us to be.

God also has incommunicable attributes that we cannot share. Only God has self-existence. Only He is uncreated and does not depend on anything outside Himself. Only God is all powerful, all knowing, and all righteous. God is not limited by time or space. God does not continue to improve. He has no room for improvement. He is perfect in every aspect of His being. Only God is truly free. Everything else is dependent on God.

The members of the Godhead exist in perfect relationship with each other. God created us to also live in relationships, both with God and with other people. This is another way we are created in the image of God.

As God created the earth, He saw that each thing was good. Do you know the first thing God said was not good?

Genesis 2:18: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone”

Have you ever felt totally alone?

God did not create us to be alone.

When Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, they had God's communicable attributes and they lived in perfect relationship with God and with each other. But after the Fall, that image was obscured by sin. They became broken, sinful, and fallen. They lost the personal relationship they had enjoyed with God. Their relationships became selfish and hurtful. And this brokenness has been passed on to every man and woman since Adam and Eve.

Yet even in our fallenness, human life is sacred. We still bear some of God's image. We have the capacity to be moral - we have an inborn sense of right and wrong. We have the capacity for rational thought. We are spiritual beings - we hunger for God. We have a soul that will live forever. And, through Christ's atonement, we can be redeemed from the Fall and restored to a right relationship with God.

Through Christ's atonement and God's work in our lives, the effects of the Fall are being healed, both in us as individuals and in creation.

Romans 8:22-23: "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body."

Paul continues in Romans 8:28-29: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."

1 Corinthians 15:49: "And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly."

The last two verses both use the word "image". It says we are being "conformed to the image of his Son" and that we "shall also bear the image of the heavenly." These are works in progress.

God's plan was prepared from before the foundation of the world so we can be redeemed and be brought into a right relationship with God through Christ's atonement on the cross.

V. Our Relationship with God

If we are seeking to be in a right relationship with God, it would be very useful to know what that relationship is.

God is the Creator and we are the creature. We are created to bear His image. Because of the Fall, we were cut off from God, doomed to death and hell and without hope except through the redemption of Christ.

This section discusses our relationship with God once we have been redeemed in Christ.

The Psalmist asks in Psalm 8:3-5: “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels”

You’ll notice that it is written “son of man” with a small “s”, not “Son of man” as in Daniel. It was written many years before the prophecies of Daniel applied this title to the Messiah. This is speaking of mankind. What are we in comparison with the works of God?

We are nothing. Yet God is mindful of us. He watches over us. He cares for us.

It says God made us a little lower than the angels. In traditional Christian theology, angels are not people who have died and gone to heaven. Angels are an entirely separate creation of God whose purpose is to praise God and carry out His commands. Satan is a fallen angel, not a fallen man.

Jesus is the one and only Son of God. We are not Jesus’ younger brothers and sisters. As the Nicene Creed states, only Jesus is “begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

If your earthly father is a doctor, you can grow up to be a doctor. But we are not children of God in the sense that we can grow up to be gods.

The Bible says that God adopts us as His sons and daughters. We are invited to become part of His family and are made heirs with Christ. This is not something we are entitled to. This is an incredible gift of God’s mercy and love.

God uses the concept of adoption to explain it.

What happens when a child is adopted?

When a child is adopted, this child, who is not genetically part of the family, is given the same rights and inheritance as a natural born member of the family.

Our adoption into God's family is explained in the following verses (emphasis mine):

Romans 8:14-16: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but ye have received the **Spirit of adoption**, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

Galatians 4:3-7: "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might **receive the adoption of sons**. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ."

Ephesians 1:3-7: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Having predestinated us **unto the adoption of children** by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace."

What does it mean to be an adopted child of God?

You might think these verses are referring to Gentiles being adopted into the chosen people so they can share the blessings with Abraham's descendents. But a careful reading does not yield that interpretation, plus Paul specifically refers to the children of Israel as adopted. In Romans 9, Paul explains the advantages of being part of the house of Israel. They are the ones to whom the Law and covenants were given and through whom the Messiah came. They are also the ones who receive the adoption into God's family.

Romans 9:4: "Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth **the adoption**, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises."

No one is automatically part of God's kingdom. No one is born to it. We all come through adoption.

Two of the verses use the word "Abba". What does that mean?

Jesus and his disciples spoke a language called Aramaic. "Abba" is the Aramaic word for "Daddy". It was one of the first words a child learned to speak, but it was not used only by children. We could also translate it into English as "dear father". It is a very close, intimate name.

In the Lord's Prayer, Christ prays to "Our [Abba] Father" (Matthew 6:9).

The children of Israel did not call God "Abba" until Christ came. In fact, the name of God was considered so sacred that it was written without vowels "JHWH" so people would not attempt to speak it aloud. But now, because God has taken us into His family, we may approach God as a child approaches their beloved father.

This new relationship does not change our appreciation of God's holiness. Jesus prayed: "Our [Abba] Father which art in heaven, Hallowed [holy] be thy name."

God is both transcendent and imminent. Those are big words. Transcendent means God surpasses all earthly experience. God is beyond what our reason and understanding can grasp. Imminent means that God is incredibly near and always with us. The holy Creator God invites us through adoption into an intimate father/child relationship with Him.

To learn more about this relationship, we need to look at the verses on adoption very carefully.

Are all men and women children of God?

What was our status before we became a child of God?

How does someone become a son or daughter of God?

Why does God do this for us?

The Bible teaches that you must be “saved” in order to become a son or daughter of God. Until you are saved, the verses above say you are in bondage, you are a servant - or some translations use the word slave. You are a slave to sin and to the law, which requires a perfection we cannot obtain.

In order to be justified by the Law, we must keep it perfectly. Only Christ was able to do that.

Galatians 3:11 states that “no man is justified by the law.”

Similarly, Romans 3:23 reminds us: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden was not about the fruit of one tree being bad and all the other fruit being good. It was about rebellion against God. It was about unbelief and pride. Eve allowed the serpent to question what God had said. She chose to follow her own way rather than trusting God and submitting gratefully to God’s command. Their disobedience brought sin and death into the world.

As a first evidence of that sin, they were afraid to be in God’s presence. They hid from God and blamed each other and the serpent (Genesis 3).

Why did their sin make them afraid of God?

Because God is holy, holy, holy.

Sin separates us from God. Even Christ, as He suffered on the cross and bore the sins of the world, was for that moment separated from God. He cried out, quoting Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Adam’s sin placed an irreconcilable chasm between us and God. Human nature was changed, and this fallen nature was passed on to Adam and Eve’s children and grandchildren and the whole human race. We can never work our way back.

Ephesians 2:1 tells us that we are “dead in trespasses and sins.”

We are born into this world physically helpless. We are also born into this world spiritually helpless, spiritually dead to the things of God. Every person since Adam has been born an object of wrath and judgment.

But that’s not all. We add to our troubles with our own sin and rebellion and pride.

Is there any sin in your life?

Is there any rebellion?

Is there any pride?

It is a miracle of grace each time a person is saved and becomes part of the family of God.

Let's look at Ephesians 2:1-9: "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

What does dead mean?

What does it mean to be dead in trespasses and sins?

Is it possible to be "more dead" or "less dead"?

Paul calls Satan "the prince of the power of the air." How does he say that Satan works in the children of disobedience?

How does he say we are saved?

Does he say we are saved by works?

Why not?

What is grace?

Grace is defined as “unmerited favor”. It is a gift you did nothing to earn, a blessing you do not deserve, a benefit you can never repay. It is a gift you accept with humbleness and gratitude. It is a gift from God to you.

Some people accuse Christians of believing in “cheap grace”. But our salvation has been purchased at a price, and it was not cheap! It was purchased with the blood of Christ. Through our works, we couldn’t afford even “cheap grace”. We sinned and were lost. Grace must be free to us or we could never afford it.

The word “redeem” means to buy back or to free from captivity by paying a ransom. In New Testament times, it referred to rescuing someone being sold into slavery – buying them back and setting them free. Christ redeems us through His atoning blood.

Romans 5:8-9: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.”

When does it say Christ died for us?

We are saved both from God’s wrath in the present – from guilt and sin and shame – and from His wrath to come – which includes eternal judgment and damnation.

God is never unfair or unjust. “The wages of sin is death,” as Paul wrote in Romans 6:23.

God warned Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:17: “for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Was God serious about this warning?

We have all qualified for death.

Romans 3:10: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.”

It would have been possible before Adam’s Fall to live a perfect life and be justified under the law. But that is not true on this side of the Fall. All have sinned, all have fallen, all are lost.

But God is merciful. He wants to be our Father. He wants us to know Him and love Him.

There are two options in this life. You can receive justice or mercy. You can receive the just punishment for your sin or the mercy of God through Christ.

Is Christ’s atonement applied automatically to everyone?

The answer is no. But it is available to all who humble themselves and come to God to receive it. It is only when we understand our relationship to God, who He is – the ultimate, all powerful Creator and perfectly holy God – and who we are – sinners in a fallen world – that we can come before Him in humility, and ask for His mercy and grace.

Someone has said that God made us with a “God-shaped hole in our hearts.”

There is a need in us that only God can fill, a desire only God can satisfy. God made us to be in relationship with Him. We will find true joy and true love and true meaning in life only when we are following and serving and loving God.

St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* in 397 AD: “Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you ... The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you” (Book I, 1).

We all have a problem – an enormous problem – called sin and death. There is only one solution. Jesus, God the Son, died on the cross as the perfect and final sacrifice to atone for our sins and reconcile us to God.

Why did He do it?

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Is faith in Jesus the only way to be saved?

Let’s look at what the Bible has to say:

John 14:6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Peter tells the people in Acts 4:12: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

John 6:35: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”

John 3:3: “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John 3:14-15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

All these verses talk about coming to Christ, having faith, believing. You may be thinking, but surely there’s something I must DO, a checklist of commandments, many required virtues.

Remember Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

What you do is come to God and accept Christ as your Savior.

Is that easy?

My answer would be yes and no. It's easy because I can do it today, right now, by praying and asking Christ to come into my life, to forgive me of my sins, and to be my Lord and Savior.

But it's hard, because that means I yield my will to His, and He becomes Lord of my life instead of me. I'm used to being in charge. That was Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden and it continues to be the primary sin of every man and woman to this day. We want to set our own destiny, determine what is right and wrong, choose what we will do – in short, we want to play god and be our own master. But having our own way will never bring us more joy than knowing the God who created us, who sustains us day by day, and who sent His Son Jesus to pay for our sins and bring us back to Him.

If you believe that people are co-eternal with God, then we have free agency by divine right. If you believe that people are a creation of God, then the freedoms we have are gifts from God and are subject to His will. The ultimate sin is rebellion against God and seeking freedom from God.

Why would anyone want to be free from God?

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we have a beautiful description of the love God has for us.

Write a quick summary of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. (It's found in Luke 15:3-7.)

What does the story mean to you?

Do you find anything strange about it?

Do you find it comforting?

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of their day. They were supposed to be caring for the spiritual needs of the people. They may have scoffed at being compared to shepherds – a lowly job. Most shepherds were hired hands.

A flock that big would have multiple shepherds. The other sheep are not left alone and in danger, but with the junior shepherds while the head shepherd, the Good Shepherd, personally searches the desert seeking one lost sheep.

And when he finds the sheep, does he punish it? Does he sigh with exhaustion and point it in the direction of home?

The parable says he “layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” He carries his precious sheep home and then calls his neighbors together to rejoice with him. God not only welcomes those who come to Him, but He Himself goes out searching for the lost sheep, calling us to come.

But what about the other 99?

Look at the setting of this parable. In Luke 15:1-2, publicans and sinners are coming to listen to Jesus. Publicans were Jews who collected taxes for the Romans. They were considered traitors to their people and they frequently extorted extra taxes from people barely surviving under the burden of poverty. “And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” This was scandalous. The Pharisees would never eat with people like that!

The Pharisees believed they were among the 99 who needed no repentance. Jesus spoke to them with biting sarcasm. If they think they need no repentance, then heaven is not rejoicing over them. Why? Because if they **think** they need no repentance, they will not come to Jesus and be saved.

In Isaiah 53:6, it says: “All we like sheep have gone astray.”

What does God want? God wants us to come to Him.

Psalm 51:17: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken spirit and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Philip Yancey has written a book entitled “What’s So Amazing About Grace?” It opens with a story about a prostitute seeking help. She was asked if she had tried going to a church for help. She was horrified at the thought and answered: “They’d just make me feel worse.” Yancey comments: “What struck me about my friend’s story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him.”

There is a song by Benny Hester called “When God Ran”. It’s based on the story of the Prodigal Son. The lyrics in the 2nd verse say:

**The day I left home I knew I’d broken His heart
And I wondered then if things could ever be the same
Then one night I remembered His love for me
And down that dusty road ahead I could see
It was the only time – it was the only time I ever saw Him run**

**And then He ran to me, He took me in His arms
Held my head to His chest, said “My son’s come home again”
Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes
With forgiveness in His voice He said,
“Son do you know I still love you?”**

As a mother, that song makes me cry. My children have not left home yet to start lives of their own, but I cannot imagine never seeing them again. I cannot imagine waiting and waiting and waiting for my child to return.

I can imagine the joy and love with which I would run to embrace my daughter or my son.

Whom have you loved most during this life?

Who has loved you?

God loves us more than the best parent on earth. Who would not want to yield, to trust, to rest in the arms of the God who loves us so! We have a God who seeks after us and rejoices over us!

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Realizing that the infinite, Creator God gives His love to us, that He cherishes us and rejoices over us, should cause us to fall to our knees in incredible humility and gratitude. It’s not about us. It’s about Him. We are lost in trespass and sin, and He comes as our Good Shepherd and rescues us and carries us home.

But what of those people who will not believe, who will not turn from the things of this world to God?

Jesus warned the rebellious Jews in John 5:39-40: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

The opposite of life is death. Jesus spoke to his followers frequently of hell. His words are clear. In Matthew 25, he divides the sheep from the goats and says to those on his left hand (those who are not favored): “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: ... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (verses 41, 46).

Matthew 19:16-26 tells the story of the rich young ruler who came to see Jesus. He claimed he had kept all the commandments from his youth – a highly unlikely claim. So Jesus tested him to see if he loved the Lord with all his heart (a commandment given by Jesus in Matthew 26:37 and in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6:5).

Turn to Matthew 19:21. What did Jesus ask the young man to do?

What was the young man's response?

How did this show what was most important to him – what was first in his heart?

God does not accept 2nd place. He wants to be first in your heart and first in your life.

Jesus warned his followers: “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

He also reassured them: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

God will be with you every day of your life on earth, and then you will live eternally with God in heaven.

But as Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, we must worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

What does it mean to worship God in spirit and in truth?

Why will false ideas lead us away from a true relationship with God?

How important is seeking and knowing the truth to you in your life?

John 8:31-32: “Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Free from what?

One of my favorite scriptures is Romans 8:37-39: “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Christ will set us free from sin, from death, from fear, from our past, from Satan, from idolatry, from ignorance, and from everything else that binds us. Does this mean we won't face trials and disappointments and even severe difficulties in this life? No. In fact, Christ tells His followers they will certainly face trials, but God will be with us in our trials. Even in our darkest hours, we can know “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.”

What could be better than to have such a relationship with God? A relationship of trust and love and peace, knowing that we are safe in Christ.

What is your relationship with this incredible, infinite, indescribable, Creator God?

Is your relationship with God one of joy? One of hope? One of trust?

Is God your closest confidante and most beloved friend?

Is God your source of wisdom and strength? Your comfort in time of need?

He can be.

VI. God is Faithful

Check all that apply:

In order to be saved, I must:

- Keep the commandments
- Endure to the end
- Perfect myself
- Be baptized and perform all the necessary ordinances
- Serve others
- Accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior

Once I am saved, in order to keep my salvation, I must:

- Keep the commandments
- Endure to the end
- Perfect myself
- Be baptized and perform all the necessary ordinances
- Serve others
- None of the above

The last answer, and only the last answer, is correct for each question.

God gave us the Law. He gave us the commandments recorded in the Bible. They are very important. But He did not give them to us so we could earn our way back to Him.

Why did God give us the Law?

The Law has several purposes:

First, it tells us the best way to live. It reflects the truth about life. Murder and adultery and greed will lead to misery in our lives and the lives of those around us. Worshipping false gods will lead us far from the source of truth.

Second, it sets a standard – we know what holiness means.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, it shows us our need of Christ. It is better to be broken and know your need than to arrogantly think you have life all figured out. The sinner who comes to Christ will be saved and rejoiced over in heaven, while the seemingly righteous people who think they need no repentance may miss the one thing they truly need.

Galatians 3:24: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”

As Jesus says of the sinful woman who anointed his feet in Luke 7:49: “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

Does that mean we should all go sin so we can be forgiven?

We already have. Sin is sin. The Pharisees in the room needed Jesus as much as the woman did, but their pride kept them aloof while her openly acknowledged sin brought her to Jesus.

Can you lose your salvation after you are saved?

John 10:27-29: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

This is called the doctrine of “perseverance”. What God has begun in a believer’s life, God will finish and bring to completion.

Philippians 1:6: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” The New International Version of the Bible reads: “... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion”

2 Timothy 4:18: “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

There are no “if” clauses in our salvation. It is based on God’s promise to us. It is not conditional, it is guaranteed. Once you are saved, you are saved. Your salvation cannot be lost. Why? Because it is not based on your righteousness. It is based on the righteousness of Christ. It is not based on your faithfulness. It is based on God’s faithfulness.

Don’t we have to do something to keep God’s favor?

We didn’t earn it, it was a gift of grace. It is an adoption. When a child is in foster care, it is a temporary arrangement. The state or the child’s family may take him back, or the foster family may decide they don’t wish to care for this child any longer. That is not our status with God. We are not foster children of God on a trial basis. We are **adopted** into God’s family.

One of the challenges for children who are adopted at an older age is to realize that it really is permanent, that they cannot lose it, that their new parents won’t send them back. When you are adopted into a family, it is for keeps, you are their child, for better or worse.

Similarly, can you imagine a marriage covenant that said: “I promise to love you as long as you please me, as long as I feel romantic towards you, as long as you are never unkind or unfair or overly demanding or sick or out of work or too much trouble.”

Would you accept a marriage like that?

God does not court us that way. When He invites us into His family, it is for eternity. Once you accept His invitation, you can know that you will be with Him forever because He is faithful to fulfill His promises.

Romans 8:29-30 is sometimes referred to as “the golden chain”. It describes God’s work in the life of a believer. “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.”

God knew us before we were created, before we existed, and He had a plan for our lives. He chose those who would be adopted into His family. And those whom He has chosen, He calls – that’s when we are saved and turn our lives over to God. Those He calls, He justifies. That means we are legally declared innocent through the blood of Christ - our sins are forgiven. And those who are justified will someday be glorified with Christ in heaven. They will persevere to the end because God will persevere in their lives.

Romans 8 continues: “If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (verses 31-34).

Your salvation cannot be lost because it is based on Christ’s righteousness, on Christ’s atonement.

Who can condemn us when Christ has paid the price for our sins?

When Christ stands with us at the judgment bar of God, making intercession for us, who can argue against us?

Christ’s atonement and suffering were not done in vain. It did not give us the possibility of salvation. It guaranteed salvation for all those who are chosen by God to receive it. As soon as we accept Christ as our Savior, our salvation is sure.

Ephesians 1:13-14: “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.”

“The earnest of our inheritance” is like earnest money placed when buying a house. You receive the influence of the Holy Ghost in your life as the guarantee of your salvation.

But you will not be glorified until you reach heaven. What happens during the time in between?

The time between “justification” and “glorification” is known as your period of “sanctification”. We talked about this in the chapter on being made “in the image of God.” We are being “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

It’s frequently a long process. Some people receive salvation at the end of their lives and go directly to be with God. The thief on the cross is a New Testament example (Luke 23:43). But most of us remain here on earth many, many years after we are saved.

If our salvation is guaranteed, does that mean we’re free to sin and do whatever we please?

Many people have falsely claimed that it does, but it does not. Paul, who wrote so much about grace and the free gift of salvation in Christ, addresses this question in depth in Romans 6:

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? ... Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God ... What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid” (verses 1-2, 12-13, 15).

What do those verses say about sin?

Ephesians 5 tells us how we should live as “followers of God.” We should hate sin like God hates sin, love others as God loves them, and live in the light of the Lord.

James continues this exhortation:

James 1:22: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

James 2:17-18: “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.”

James 4:17: “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.”

Does this contradict what Paul has told us? It doesn't. When Paul speaks of being saved by faith, he is speaking of conversion, of coming to Christ through saving faith. James is speaking to believers in Christ, teaching them how to live a Christian life.

The faith that brought you salvation will produce good works, that's what happens when you give your life to Christ, when the Holy Ghost moves into your heart, and when God adopts you as His son or daughter.

Will it happen instantly?

We live in a fallen world and change takes time. But if your faith never leads to gratitude to God, never leads you to want to follow God and keep His commandments, never leads you to love others, then one must wonder whether you had real faith to begin with. It is not that your faith has died, but that it was never alive at all.

Good works are not the cause of salvation. Salvation is a gift that cannot be purchased. We have no possible way to earn it. In fact, our works are not truly good as long as we are trying to earn salvation. Only when there's nothing to earn can we serve God selflessly, out of love for God and others.

Good works will not earn us a better place in heaven. Perhaps you think that Christ's atonement will get you into heaven, but you want the highest level, the top spot, so you have to work to earn that. No. There is nothing we can do that will improve on what Christ has done. Let me say that again, **there is nothing we can do that will improve on what Christ has done!**

Realizing that we don't earn our salvation frees us from pride. It's not me – it's Him.

It frees us from pretending and wearing "masks" trying to impress others with how good we are. We're not – God is.

It frees us from unrealistic expectations. We will never be that good – until we are with God in heaven and we stand in His righteousness.

Good works and gradual improvement are a consequence of salvation, they are something we strive for, but we cannot boast, it is the result of God working in us.

Perfection is not possible for us in this fallen state and in this fallen world. Only Christ, who was God, lived a perfect and sinless life.

Believers all have times when we fail to do what is right, and when we do it is sin, and it brings consequences, many of which are unpleasant.

What is our response when we sin?

We must turn to the source of our forgiveness. We run to God.

Is that what you were thinking, or would you run far away from God?

A pastor I know told how he would hide from his father as a child when he got into trouble. But his friend, who sometimes got into trouble with him, would run home to his father.

Can you run away from God?

Psalm 139:7-12: “Wither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee”

There is nowhere we can go where God cannot find us. God knows what you’ve done. He knew what you would struggle with before the creation of the world.

What do we do when we sin? We run to God.

Will He turn us away?

We know what His response will be because we are forgiven the moment we are saved. That forgiveness includes every sin you have committed and every sin you will ever commit.

Often our sins show us areas in our lives that are not fully surrendered to God, areas we need to work on. God continues to teach us through our sins and trials and hardships and failures. We continue to realize our need of Him. As a parent comforts a toddler who has fallen, God opens His arms to us and sets us on our feet again. Only He has the power to cleanse and forgive our sins, we cannot do it ourselves. How wonderful it is to know that He has that power!

To presume that we can sin all we like because God will keep forgiving us is an offense to God. That does not show a heart filled with gratitude and grace. But to realize that God will keep forgiving us and teaching us, despite our failings, as we seek to follow Him is to rest in God's promise. It leads us away from sin as God's mercy fills our view.

God has many lessons to teach us as we work through the process of sanctification. Our time on earth is a precious time to us and to Him.

What joys do you especially enjoy in your life right now?

What trials are you facing?

What things are you suffering or have you suffered?

Joni Eareckson Tada broke her neck in a diving accident in July 1967. She was 17 years old. She was left a quadriplegic, unable to move her hands or legs, condemned to a wheel chair for the rest of her life. She has written many books on faith, on the mercy of God, and on suffering. She speaks from experience.

She talks of Christ's suffering for us and how our faith, even in the midst of suffering, is a witness to God both on earth and in heaven. Yielding to His will for us, whatever it may be, is a gift we give back to God. It teaches us to understand and to comfort those around us, making us partners with God in relieving suffering. And it draws us closer to God in a way that nothing else could ever do. When there is no possible way we can continue without God's help, God is there. The way may be hard, very hard, but He will never leave us nor forsake us.

Isaiah 49:15-16 tells us: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands"

In 2 Corinthians 12, we read how Paul prayed that God would take away the "thorn in the flesh" he was suffering from. We don't know what the problem was, Paul doesn't tell us, but we know it grieved him. In verse 9, Paul shares with us the answer he received: "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

In other words, God said no. Paul's weakness was there for a purpose, so he would rely on God's strength.

Paul's response (completing verse 9): "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul accepted God's will for him, even when it was not what Paul wanted, even when it was painful and hard.

God didn't keep Daniel from being thrown to the lions, but God was with him and protected him through that experience.

What do you suppose it was like for Daniel to walk out of the lions den, or for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to walk out of the fiery furnace?

How strong was their faith after that experience?

When we have walked through trials with God, we know how completely we can rely on Him.

Faith is about a relationship – a relationship with God – a relationship based in trust and love.

1 John 4:19: “We love him, because he first loved us.”

Titus 2:14: He “gave himself for us.”

Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

Every challenge we face, every trial we suffer, every joy we experience will be for our eternal good, it will be as a “refiner’s fire” (Malachi 3:2), and will ultimately show God’s mercy and love in our lives.

We will be able to say as Matt Redman does in his song “Blessed Be Your Name”:

**Blessed be your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's all as it should be
Blessed be your name**

**Blessed be your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be your name**

**Every blessing you pour out,
I turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say...
Blessed be the name of the Lord**

That is faith far beyond the Santa Claus “what’s in it for me” approach to God.

Isaiah 40:31: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

Did anyone in the Bible have to wait for their reward from God?

See how many people you can list who waited on God:

Abraham waited an awfully long time for his promised son. Joseph spent the best years of his youth as a slave and in prison. The children of Israel waited for deliverance from Egypt. The whole world waited for the Messiah to come.

Did they wait because God didn't love them or God didn't care? Or was waiting part of God's plan?

Even the evil done to us, God can use for good, as Joseph told his brothers who sold him into Egypt: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Genesis 50:20).

They intended to kill their brother, but instead Joseph saved them and their families from the famine. God used their wickedness to accomplish His good plan.

God was faithful to Joseph, faithful to Abraham, faithful to the children of Israel, faithful to keep all the promises He had made, and He will be faithful to us in our individual lives.

Do you think you could trust God if He called you to face a difficult trial you had not expected?

How do we feel when people trust us?

How does God feel when we put our complete trust in Him?

What things do you fear the most?

Is God, the Creator of heaven and earth, capable of handling your problems?

Perhaps we think God is not capable of handling it. More likely we fear that He will not handle it the way we would choose. That must be left in His hands. Only He is God. But we can be sure that God is faithful and that we can trust in Him.

VII. God in the Church Today

If God spent all of human history before the cross preparing His people for the promised Messiah, how important is Christ's work to God?

If no man, woman, or child can be saved without Christ's atonement, how important is that message?

Do you think God, who kept His covenants with Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the prophets up until the time of Christ, would allow His message to be quickly lost after Christ's ascension into heaven?

Do you believe that the Bible is a reliable witness proclaiming God's word and His truth to us today?

What was Jesus' view on the truthfulness of the scriptures?

Matthew 5:18: "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." The New International Version translates this: "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen." All will be fulfilled.

Jesus quoted scripture many, many times. He learned from the scriptures as a boy and explained them to the learned men in the temple at the age of 12. He used them as a defense against Satan's temptations. He quoted them as a source of authority, identified himself as the fulfillment of prophecy, and appealed to them for wisdom and comfort.

In John 10:35, he tells us "the scripture cannot be broken."

And after his resurrection, Jesus instructed his Apostles in Luke 24:44-45: "And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures."

Similarly, Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Some people claim that the Bible was radically altered after the time of Christ, and that much of the truth and simplicity of the gospel was lost. Scholarly studies do not support that view. We have manuscripts showing the Bible to be remarkably well preserved. In fact, it was supernaturally preserved by the hand of God.

If the Bible contains exactly what God wants it to say, why isn't it easier to understand?

First, we often bring our own ideas of what we expect the Bible to say.

Second, we have to read it in the historical context in which it was written, understand the literary forms used, and understand the meaning of the words chosen.

Third, when we have questions, we need to use scripture to interpret scripture. The Bible is not a random sampling of religious writings but an intentional compilation of material put together through the direct influence of God. As we have done in this Bible study (for example with Exodus 33 about Moses speaking with God "face to face"), we interpret what a passage means in the context of the rest of the chapter and with reference to the entire message of the Bible. Much that was unclear in the Old Testament became clear when seen in the light of Christ. Some material will not become clear until Christ comes again.

Fourth, one of the special jobs of the Holy Ghost is to enlighten our minds and teach us to understand the scriptures.

John 14:26: “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”

Jesus specifically said that he spoke some things in parables “because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matthew 13:13). Some mysteries are given to us only as we have the faith and experience to understand them. But God has promised that He will reveal His truth to us “line upon line” and “precept upon precept” (Isaiah 28:10), “and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

All revelation before Christ was a preparatory gospel to prepare the way for Him. The fullness of the gospel was given once, in the fullness of times, through Jesus Christ.

Were people from Old Testament times saved?

Yes, through faith in the Messiah who would come. But He came once for all. And His message has gone forth from that point into all the earth.

Matthew 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

Christ, in his final instructions to his disciples, known as “The Great Commission”, instructed them: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Does it sound like He’s planning for His gospel to quickly be lost from the earth?

What about the scriptures warning the early saints about apostasy?

God warned them, and continues to warn us, that there will be false teachers and that many will try to corrupt the truth. Satan and the world offer many counterfeits to God's truth.

The Reformation occurred at a time when the gospel message had been badly obscured. Churches have done many things that are not pleasing in the sight of God.

But the question is, was the gospel of Christ ever completely lost from the earth or has it continued until this day?

Let's take a look at the apostasy scriptures:

2 Thessalonians 2:3: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;"

We must read verse 4 also, it's the rest of the sentence: "Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God."

The footnotes in the LDS edition of the Bible cross reference this to the Antichrist. When does the Antichrist come?

1 John 2:18 tells us that "even now are there many antichrists." But the great Antichrist spoken of in the Book of Revelation comes in the last days right before the Second Coming of Christ. He is the one sitting in the temple of God attempting to take God's place. This verse is talking about the very last days right before Christ comes again.

Even in the final days, under the terrible persecution described in the Book of Revelation, a remnant will remain who are true to Christ. What God has ordained will not be thwarted by Satan or by man.

Paul warned his followers about those who would try to lead them astray:

2 Corinthians 11:13-15: “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works.”

Galatians 1:8: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”

Jesus also warned us in Matthew 24: “And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. ... And many false prophets shall arise, and shall deceive many. ... For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (verses 4-5,11,24-27).

Do any of these verses speak of a complete apostasy where Christ’s truth and the authority to act in His name are lost from the earth?

What do they warn believers to be careful of?

How do you know if a prophet or apostle is true or false?

How can we tell if someone is teaching a different gospel?

Are there things you believe that are fundamentally different from or are major additions to the beliefs of the early Christian church?

There are significant differences between the Old Covenant, revealed progressively throughout the Old Testament, and the New Covenant revealed in Christ. The Old Covenant contained a strict legal code of rules and performances. It can be divided into three parts: moral rules, rules for governing the nation of Israel, and the duties of the priests, which were centered on animal sacrifices.

Before the atonement, men and women approached God through intermediaries – God’s chosen priests and prophets. Now we can approach our “Abba Father” directly as His child.

This change in our relationship with God was demonstrated visibly and dramatically at the time of Christ’s death. Matthew 27:50-51 describes it: “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom”

What was the veil of the temple?

What was kept behind the veil?

What was the purpose of the veil?

Who could go behind the veil?

In the tabernacle constructed by Moses and in King Solomon's temple and in Herod's temple - in all the Old Testament temples - the building or tent was divided into three parts:

The Outer Courtyard had the altar of sacrifice and the laver for washing.

The Holy Place had the lampstand, the table of shewbread, and the altar of incense.

The Holy of Holies was behind the veil and contained the Ark of the Covenant. It was also called the Mercy Seat. It represented the dwelling place of God.

The veil was a curtain. It symbolically taught the children of Israel that they were separated from the presence of God. The high priest could go behind the veil only once a year on the Day of Atonement to offer a sacrifice for the people to God. This was so sacred, and so dangerous, that a rope was tied around his ankle so if he offended God and died, they could pull him out because no one would be able to go in to get him.

This is what John the Baptist's father Zacharias was doing when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple to announce that John would be born and would prepare the way for the Messiah (Luke 1).

Temple sacrifices continued through Jesus' life. In Luke 2:22-24, we read how Jesus' parents took him to Jerusalem to offer the sacrifice prescribed in the law for a first born male child. We read of Jesus and His disciples attending the temple and celebrating the feasts.

But at Jesus' death, the atonement was complete, and the veil was torn from the top to the bottom. It was torn by God, not by man. Men and women were no longer shut out from the presence of God. The debt was paid in full by Christ's blood, the final and perfect sacrifice for sin. In fact, the temple itself was destroyed by the Romans not many years later, in 70 AD. There has not been a physical building that is the temple of God on the earth since that time.

This is explained to us in Hebrews 9:6-8: "Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while the first tabernacle was yet standing."

“The way into the holiest of all” – the ability for us to approach God personally – was not available through the temple. It was not available until Christ came.

Hebrews 9 continues: “But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. ... For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (verses 11-12, 24).

Christ’s temple is not made with hands, it’s not a physical building.

Hebrews 10:10-12: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.”

Sitting down signifies that it is done. Christ sat down at the right hand of God – in the place of highest honor.

The priests had been offering the same sacrifices day after day, year after year, since the Law of Moses was given. They were pleasing to God when done with a pure heart, not pleasing when done in insincerity, but they could only teach people of Christ. Sacrifices with the blood of animals could not cleanse people from sin. But Christ’s sacrifice, performed once, brought salvation to the world.

As He died on the cross, Jesus declared: “It is finished” (John 19:30). What God had been promising from the Fall of Adam was completed in Christ!

Men and women were no longer separated from God! The veil in the temple was torn down and we were given a new opportunity to approach God as our Father, to approach God in love rather than fear. This is the New Covenant of grace preached in the New Testament. We have been reconciled to God. We have one High Priest who is Christ and the final sacrifice is done.

How does God dwell among His people now?

1 Corinthians 6:19: “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?”

Like the Holy of Holies in Old Testament temples, our bodies have now become the temples where God’s Spirit dwells – God in us.

The temple and animal sacrifices were replaced with the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The temple sacrifices looked forward to Christ who would come. The Sacrament reminds us to look back to the atonement and resurrection of Christ and forward to His Second Coming.

We no longer have temple priests, because we no longer need a human mediator to go to God on our behalf.

Does this also affect the role of the prophet?

Prophecy has two components: “forth-telling” – to speak the word of God, to teach, to warn – and “fore-telling” – to reveal the future, particularly to prophesy of Christ.

The purpose of an Old Testament prophet was to speak for God. Scrolls were rare in that day, so was the ability to read, and men and women could not go directly to God.

Even in the Old Testament, it is unusual to have a prophet leader like Moses. There were often multiple prophets speaking to the people, even groups of prophets (for example in 1 Samuel 10:9-10). Some of their words were recorded as scripture. Most were not. The idea that we must have one prophet to declare the word of God to the entire world is not the pattern we see in the Old Testament.

Let’s look at the New Testament:

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul tells us: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

Acts 13:1: “Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers”

Acts 15:32: “And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the bretheren with many words, and confirmed them.”

1 Corinthians 12:8-10: “For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues.”

1 Corinthians 14:29-31, which is speaking of how things should be done during church meetings, adds: “Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.”

Prophecy is an important gift of the Spirit.

How do these verses show the gift of prophecy being used in the New Testament church?

Why does 1 Corinthians 14:29-31 say the gift of prophecy is given?

1 Corinthians 14:3: “But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort.”

Edification is education that leads to understanding. It refers to teaching and preaching the Word of God. The Holy Ghost, through the gift of prophecy, illuminates the meaning. That means we understand it, it becomes clear to us. The Holy Ghost also helps us apply the Word of God to our situation and our needs.

A pastor uses the gift of prophecy as he stands before his congregation to preach from the Bible. He uses it as he counsels people who have come to him for help. Exhortation is encouraging others to live what they know and warning them of danger if they turn away. He may be specifically inspired how to help or instruct them. The gift of prophecy brings comfort as it helps us understand God’s will and purpose in our lives.

This is a wonderful gift given to bless the church, but it does not include revelation of new truth as we saw in Old Testament times.

The Old Testament records God's preparation for Christ's atonement. The gospel was revealed "precept upon precept; line upon line" (Isaiah 28:10), until the fullness of time arrived for Christ to come to earth.

Galatians 4:4-5: "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law"

The New Testament records Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and the establishment of His church on the earth. The Book of Revelation looks forward to the time when Christ will come again. That is the gospel message God desires to be preached to all the earth (Mark 16:5).

Hebrews 1:1-2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son"

Now Christ has come and the fullness of God's plan has been revealed.

Exhortation, illumination, and application continue, given to pastors and leaders, given to parents and teachers, and given to us as individuals. But there is no new revelation because everything God has chosen to reveal was fully revealed in Christ.

God Himself took human form and lived among us. Christ is the fullness of God's revelation to man. We cannot improve on that revelation. We cannot add anything new to what God has given.

The Holy Ghost will never reveal anything that contradicts, deletes, or adds to the Word of God recorded in the Bible. The canon is closed – no new scripture will be given.

God is faithful to His people. He has not allowed His gospel to be lost from the earth.

If there has not been a complete apostasy, is a "restoration" of the gospel needed?

The "stone [that] was cut out of the mountain without hands" that broke the statue in pieces and grew until it filled the whole earth, shown to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream in Daniel 2, is Christ's kingdom beginning with His life on earth 2000 years ago during the time of the Romans – the last civilization symbolized in the statue - and continuing until Christ comes again. At that time, every earthly kingdom will be destroyed and Christ will reign on earth as He now reigns in heaven. The gospel has been here since Christ brought it 2000 years ago.

You may be asking, if God's church has been on the earth all this time, where is it? What does God's church look like today?

I attend a non-denominational church. People ask me how I can belong to the "true church" when my church has only one congregation, only one building? I was thinking about that question one day as I walked into church. We started to sing Michael W. Smith's song "The Heart of Worship": "I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about You, it's all about You, Jesus."

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus states: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

We are commanded to meet together as a body of believers, to worship together, to teach each other, and to help one another. God does not call us to stand alone in our faith. But the heart and soul of the church are the people of God. Wherever God's people are, they are part of Christ's church.

Christ's church is not defined by buildings or denominations, bishops or pastors, membership lists or records, policies or programs. It includes every person in every nation, of every kindred and tongue, of every age, and from every time period in history, who has accepted Christ as their Savior and been saved through His atoning power. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, you are part of Christ's church regardless of what building you frequent on Sunday morning.

On the other hand, many people sit in our churches who are not part of Christ's church. Christ is not the center of their life nor the love of their heart.

But isn't there one true church?

Yes, it is comprised of all the people who have given their lives to Jesus.

No bishop or pastor or apostle or prophet has ever been perfect. No church is "true" if by that you mean infallible, always right, an organization you can trust your salvation to. That kind of allegiance belongs only to God, only to Christ who is our infallible Prophet, Priest, and King.

I would encourage you to look for a good church that teaches the Biblical truth about God.

There are wonderful, sincere people of faith in every religion. Their faith does not make their religion true. Faith is not the answer. Faith in the true and living God is the answer. It is God who is true. What we put our faith in is crucially important. Only God has power to save us from our sins, from death, and from hell.

Furthermore, people can use names in many ways. If we carve a block of wood and call it God, is it God? No. If we elevate a man and call him Jesus or Jehovah, is he? No. Jesus did not just claim to be the Messiah. He backed up His claims. He performed miracles. He fulfilled prophecy. And most dramatically, He rose from the dead. He had the power to do what only God could do.

What if we define God our own way? Can we do that? Can we make a checklist of all the things we want God to be and think of Him that way and call Him God?

That kind of faith won't save us. Nor will we be saved by following someone else's idea of God unless they are teaching us the truth.

The truth has many counterfeits. We must ask ourselves, is our idea of God Biblical? Is it what Christ taught when He was here on earth? Is it true?

A story is told of two men in a small airplane. They realized the plane was going to crash, and then to their added horror discovered there was only one parachute. However, they also had an umbrella. No matter how much faith you have in the umbrella, it will not save you. What you put your faith in matters.

John 14:6: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

VIII. Understanding the Atonement

How much does God love us? He not only created us, and created this beautiful, incredible world for us to live on, but when we rebelled against Him, He paid the price for our sins.

Luke tells us that Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane was so intense that "there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:43-44).

After his trial, Pilate ordered Jesus flogged. This was done by Roman soldiers using a long leather whip with pieces of bone and metal imbedded in it that cut through human flesh, veins, and muscle, causing extreme blood loss. The whipping stopped only when the victim was near death. Jesus was so weak, he could not carry his cross and Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry it for him (Matthew 27:32).

Then the crucifixion began. Doctors who have studied crucifixion say the pain and torture were almost indescribable. The nails were not driven through Jesus' palms, which would not have held his weight, but between the two bones of his wrists through the median nerve putting him in continuous and incredible pain. As he was lifted up, the full weight of his body was placed on his wrists, causing his shoulders and elbows to be dislocated and stretching his arms. Because of the weight on his diaphragm, he could breathe in, but he could not exhale except by pushing up on the nail in his feet causing more excruciating pain and scraping his flogged back along the rough wood. Death by crucifixion included horrible cramps, spasms, dehydration, and pain, all continually increasing but not sufficient to cause unconsciousness. Breaking a person's legs caused them to die because they could no longer push up on the nail to breathe. Otherwise, death came through slow suffocation as carbon dioxide built up in the blood causing tissue damage and a build up of fluid around the heart and lungs.

Look again at Psalm 22:14-18: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture." This was prophesied. It was God's plan.

Other men have been crucified, but no one has suffered as Christ did. He added to that physical suffering the guilt and shame of every sin – not just for one life – but for every person who has ever lived or will ever live who accepts Christ's offer of salvation.

God in Christ paid it all! The atonement is the exchange of our sins for Christ's righteousness. It is based on nothing we have done. We can never pay that debt. We can never earn or add to our salvation. Christ has done the work and paid the price in full.

Nails did not hold Jesus on the cross. It was His love for us that kept Him there. To see the cost of sin, look at the cross. To see the love of God, look at the cross.

IX. How Can I Be Saved?

The way is simple, but also very difficult. You must realize who you are: you are a creation, a finite and mortal human, sinful both through Adam's Fall and through your own transgression, completely unable to save yourself. Adam's sin was rebellion and seeking independence from the God who created and loved him. Independence from God will absolutely lead to ruin.

Then you must invite Christ to apply His atonement personally to you. Ask Him to be your Savior and the Lord of your life. You give God your faith and trust. He in return will give you His righteousness, His love and mercy, and His gift of life eternal. Then you will be His forever and ever – an adopted child of the Most High God.

How do you do it? With a broken heart and a contrite spirit, let your heart cry out to God. He will hear your prayer and He will answer.

Your relationship with God will be your greatest source of hope and strength and joy forever. Then you can know not only that you will be with God in heaven, but also that God will be with you now – every day, in every crisis, in every joy. God will be your Father and you will be His beloved child. Someday we will see His face and know His glory. There, with all the saints, we will worship the Lord.

There is no greater purpose and no greater joy than to know God, to worship Him, to walk in His ways, and to serve Him and serve others as He has called you to do.

You can know that you are loved and cherished, redeemed and justified under the law, and declared to be righteous in Christ. You can know that God's promises are sure, with no conditions, no "if" clauses, no traps where you might fail. Does it sound too good to be true? God is that good!

God, the Creator of heaven and earth, wants a relationship with you. He wants you to know and be with Him – now and forever. There is no greater promise!

Is this the desire of your heart? If you've never accepted Jesus as your Savior or if you're not sure, kneel before Him now and invite Him to come into your life.

2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new."

Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

John 8:32: "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

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Recommended Reading

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