

Know God's Good News Personally
How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

by David Shelley

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We can summarize the central message of the Bible around four essential ideas:

- 1. The Creator is true and good.**
- 2. We are broken and need to be restored.**
- 3. The Creator came to us in the flesh to die in our place and to rise to begin new creation.**
- 4. If you trust the Lord about His good news, you will be saved into life with Him forever.**

Those brief statements are what this sequence of documents are about. My purpose in writing this series is primarily to help you find life in the central message of the Bible. Whether that interests you or not, reading them should do you no harm. I certainly mean no harm by offering them. My secondary purpose was to reawaken joy in people who had let these ideas grow dusty and dim in their minds.

Here in the table of contents are the topics as I have titled them in the form of questions. (That may appear obvious, but you would be amazed at how often people miss the obvious. I know I do.)

Each of these documents addresses a question in about 2 pages, on average. Most of us can read two pages in 5 or 6 minutes—although you can spend a lot longer than that thinking about what you read.

I wrote these to be read in this order. They will make the most sense if you read them that way. Of course, you will read them, or not read them, as you desire, in any order you desire.

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Part 1

What is the Bible's basic plot?

Douglas Wilson says an atheist begins with two premises: There is no God, and I hate Him. I think I agree with the person who said, "Tell me about the god you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that one either."

Honestly, I have found a lot of portrayals of God unhelpful. But in the Bible, God says he is making Himself known to people. I am interested in knowing what the Creator desires for people to know. I want to know what kind of relationship he had in mind when he made me. I want the opportunity to think about what he says. If the Bible were true, would it make a difference? If questions like these make you uncomfortable, welcome to the caravan. If thinking about something that important doesn't increase your heart rate a bit, you probably don't understand the questions.

The Bible keeps drawing me back because the more I understand it, the more meaningful this crazy life becomes. And as meaning brings the most important things into focus, I become more conscious of what God is doing in this world. Of course, if you don't believe any god could exist, you probably won't make any sense of the Bible. But if God could be real, and if he cares about the universe he has made, the Bible can be a lens that brings everything into greater focus.

The Bible is not an incoherent collection of stories and sayings. If you judge the book by pulling one piece of it out of context, you will probably find it confusing and frustrating. For me, knowing the plot brings the pieces to life and breathes fresh air into the smoky, choking areas of my life.

The Bible does have a storyline and a central message. It is about what the God of the Bible is saying to people.

The central message strings together the 66 different books which make up the Bible. The Bible was written by at least 40 authors. They wrote in three languages. They wrote on three continents. They wrote over a period of about 1500 years. And yet they are tied together by a story with a main character, a special relationship, a catastrophe, a great rescue, a promise, and an invitation.

The Bible is made up of the story of the Old Testament (or Old Covenant) and the New Testament (or New Covenant). The Old Testament includes 39 books that describe the need for a Savior, the assurance of a Savior, and the hope of a Savior. The New Testament includes 27 books about the Savior who came and is coming again.

The main character is the Creator and Savior. English-speakers call him God. He speaks us into existence. He gives every moment of life. He is eternally good and true. That idea is the key to understanding everything else.

The special relationship is His personal love for people. He created people, male and female, to personally know and enjoy Him.

The catastrophe is that we have betrayed him and turned against him. Instead of enjoying his life, love and glory, we trashed his creation and spread hate and death.

The great rescue is that he had to know a way to do justice and save us at the same time. He not only had to know it; he also had to have the desire and the power to do it. The good news is that he did it.

He didn't do it in secret. He came publicly, in a specific time and place in our history and world. He came in the flesh. He lived a human life, but he never rejected eternal goodness and truth the way we did. And he died a horrible death in our place. The Good took the place of those who rejected Good. He saved all those who trust Him. He rose from death, showing that death does not have the final say. He has the final word. Those who trust him are no longer condemned. They are alive in his grace.

The promise is that he is remaking his people for a new, remade creation, free from the destruction, hate and death we have spread. And *the promise is for people of every nation, language and tribe*—forever distinct and yet happily unified in Him.

The invitation is to trust Him, rather than our hates and fears, and make this journey with Him. If we turn from self-centered to Christ-centered trust we are walking with the Giver of life.

That is the central story of the Bible. We call it the *gospel*. The reason I write about it is to awaken joy in those who are thirsty for joy.

What does the gospel have to do with joy? To answer that, I need to explain what the word GOSPEL really means, and I will attempt that in Part 2.

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Part 2

What does the word “gospel” mean?

The short answer to this question is that *gospel* means “good news.” If that’s all you want to know about this, of course you are welcome to skip the rest of Part 2. If you want to know where the word came from, and you can bear with me as I introduce an ancient word, read on.

We get the whole story of God’s love for His people from the whole Bible. But we get the term “gospel” from the New Testament, which was written originally in Greek. That was the international language of the Mediterranean world when Jesus was here in the flesh.

The Greek New Testament often uses the term EUAGGELION, which means a *good message*. EU means it is good, and AGGELION means message or news.

The Greek AGGELOS, which comes into English as the word *angel*, means literally *messenger*. So when the Bible mentions an *angel*, it does not necessarily mean a messenger from Heaven, although God does send some messengers from Heaven to mortals—nearly always to the surprise and great fear of the mortals.

In the Bible, Heavenly messengers nearly always have to start by saying, “Stop being afraid” before they deliver the Good News. Why? Because when fallen people such as you and I meet someone glorious, it shakes us. It awakens us to realities of which we were not aware. It scares us to realize that something so awesome could exist without us thinking about it every day of our lives.

In Revelation 22 (in the last book in the Bible) a writer named John says when he saw a vision of Heaven, he fell down to worship at the feet of the messenger (the AGGELOS) who had revealed it. But the messenger said, “Don’t! I am a fellow servant with you and all those who give watchful care to the *words* of this book. Worship God!”

The God of the Bible is not a mere concept for us like or dislike. I suspect that, like John, we all need to be shaken awake to know that *God is the awesome reality* in which we live and move and exist (as it says in Acts 17:28, another book in the Bible).

The Lord has at times sent messengers from Heaven with His message. But the Lord also saves down-to-earth humans like us *through* that message. And He involves them in delivering His AGGELION, His message. In the New Testament it is the EUAGGELION, THE *Good News* of God’s grace in sending Jesus into a specific time and place to die and rise, so that all who trust Him will have eternal life in a remade world.

We translate EUAGGELION with the old English term *gospel*. *Gospel* comes from *good* and *spiel*, meaning a good story or good message. When the Bible talks about the gospel, it is not

talking about a style of music or a way of speaking or even a religion. It is talking about the central story and message of the Bible, the Good News of the God who saves his people.

How can I be rescued out of the mess of my life? How can I be loved by God? What is the power of God for salvation?

Romans 1:16 says “the gospel” is the power of God for the salvation of all who trust Him. The Good News is the knowledge that is ultimately good and ultimately true because it is the essential means of knowing the only Creator who is, eternally, pre-existently, at all times and forever the Source of all good and all truth.

This is where our understanding of the saving gospel begins. There must be some essential Good and unchanging Truth, or it is pointless to talk about good or truth. The first thing to know about the gospel is the good Creator. I’ll elaborate on him more in Part 3.

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Part 3.1

Who made the universe?

Genesis is the first book in the Bible. This is how the Bible begins (in the New International translation). I have underlined some phrases that may seem so basic we hardly notice what they are saying.

Genesis 1

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and He separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, ^b and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

²⁹ Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

³¹ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. (NIV)

(The Bible has many translations in order to communicate from the original three languages into the language people speak today. Translating the Bible is not the same thing as rewriting it. The purpose of translation is not to change the message, but to make it readable to other generations and cultures. If God approved only one language, it would not make sense that he gave it in three different original languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.)

One year I wanted to give a gift to a friend. I took a piece of old, dry, weathered wood, and on it I painted a picture I thought my friend would enjoy. When I gave it to him he said, "That's interesting. Why kind of art is that?"

I said, "It's simply a painting."

He asked, "But how did you get it on the wood?"

I said, "I painted it onto the wood."

He asked, "But how did you paint it onto the wood?"

I said, "I dipped a brush into paint, and I brushed the paint onto the wood until I had that picture."

He said, "You mean, YOU are the artist?" He was so interested in the art, it had not crossed his mind that I painted it personally for him.

We do that with God. We are so interested in the things He has made, we may not even think of the Creator being great enough to make it.

The first thing to know is the first thing God tells us. **Genesis 1:1** says that before anything else, God already was, and God is the Source of everything else. God created everything, heaven and earth.

So God is, from the start, the Creator of everything else. In the beginning there is One Creator, and then there is everything else. The two basic categories are the CreatOR and what He creatED.

You and I are in the latter category. We are not God. We tend to think we are, and act like we think we are, but that is our basic problem, and we'll get to that later. Our problems begin with getting the first thing wrong. I am not God. You are not God. Neither the material realm nor the spiritual realm revolves around you. According to the Bible, they exist, every last fragment, by the will of God.

That means they would not exist right now if God were not continuing to will their continued existence. **Colossians 1:17*** tells us that *in Him all things hold together*. God is holding you together right now, and without Him you would not be.

So the Bible says that you are dependent at every moment on your Creator, who desires for you to be and gives you existence.

If you have never had that thought before, it is a lot to get your mind around. None of us begins with a fully-formed consciousness of our dependence on God for our existence. But humanity has a history-long awareness that *something greater* than us is at work.

The Bible tells us that the *something greater* is personal, that He is not less personal and intelligent than humans, that in truth our personhood and intelligence derives from Him.

People recognized not only that the *something greater* is supremely creative, but also that he creates order. Any study of the universe recognizes that there is order and meaning in what we experience in this universe. Meaning and order does not come from nonsense. Meaning and order comes from intelligence. Everything that exists tells us that it has been purposed, that it has been communicated to us. I will reflect on that in Part 3.2.

*Both Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 say that God sustains creation through Christ, without whom God would not continue to sustain a world that has opposed Him as we have. I will get to Christ in part 5.

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Part 3.2

How did God create the universe?

The first page of the Bible, Genesis 1, tells us that God created everything that is. The Bible also tells us that we continue to exist because God continues to give us every moment of existence. And Genesis 1 also tells us that God created and sustains everything by addressing it. **Hebrews 1: 3** says He sustains all things *by His powerful Word*, which means both communicating and reasoning.

God created everything else, and He created it by speaking. In Genesis 1 He tells us in verses 4, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, and 26 that He spoke the cosmos into being. “God said,” and it was. He created it by His Word. God gives the Word, and it is as God says. God speaks, and everything else comes into being. It is, literally, because He speaks to it.

The only God is the Speaker of the Word by which anything else exists. The whole Bible follows from that starting point. This is crucial, because God has revealed Himself to us through His words, and our basic problem is that we reject God’s words. (I will get to the problem in Part 4.) The solution to our problem is through the “Word made flesh.” (That is Part 5.) And our experience of that solution will have something to do with the living presence of that Word in us and us in Him (Part 6 of this book).

So we have everything deriving our existence from God, and we have God speaking us into existence by His Word and being known to us by His Word. And the sixth day of creation sees Him speaking into existence a being (called *man* or *human*) who will speak words back to God.

We call the Bible “the Word of God” because (1) God is the Main Character, and (2) the purpose of the Bible is so that we can know God, and (3) He makes Himself known through words, and (4) the words have specific meaning, and (5) He tells us we can have eternal life by means of faith, which comes through hearing His Word, which is His power to save us.

God speaks us into existence, then reveals Himself through meaningful words that call for a meaningful response. It is not magical; it is relational. God created everything not to exist on its own; He created everything to exist in relation to Him. Apart from Him it would not exist. We cannot be in touch with our most basic existence if we deny our relationship with our meaningful Creator. We, male and female, are in our essence created for conversation with God. We were made to receive His words and to speak words in response to Him.

Genesis 3:1 says our problem began with the question, “Did God really *say* . . . ?” And then the man and the woman disregarded what God had spoken to them. All the problems of the world result from a disbelief of what God says.

Romans 10:9 says that our salvation involves *confessing* specific words with *our mouths* and *trusting* specific truths about God *in our hearts*. (In both ancient Greek and modern English, *heart* represents a person's deepest commitments.) So God's *words* are relevant for you and me. They are relevant eternally and practically. The God of the Bible says you were created to hear His words and to respond to Him.

My wife Lorie married an introvert. She did not know all that she was getting into. But she experienced something strange early on. Often, she would ask a question, and she would not get an immediate response. This had to be awkward for her, and she shows, to this day, extraordinary patience with him.

Her question might be simple. He is sitting at the table and reading. She has set food right in front of him on the table. She opens the refrigerator door and asks, "What would you like to drink?" She expects an immediate answer. She would be happy with a one-word answer, such as, "tea." But what she gets is silence and a puzzled expression.

Here is what she did not know at first: The introvert does not automatically move her question to the front of the line. The introvert is preoccupied with another important train of thought. Her question has not yet even entered his mind, to say nothing of checking in and phoning home.

Her introvert has an inner conversation already going on. So the giver of sustenance (Lorie, in this case) is put on hold. She may give him a drink of her own choice, or she may give him nothing, because he is not responsive to her words.

Like my wife, God speaks, but we are too preoccupied with ourselves to respond. Are you aware that the One giving you sustenance at this very moment has spoken? The Source of every good gives us life. He gives us everything necessary to live it in relation with Him. He speaks so that we our knowledge of Him might sustain us and refresh us. Usually, we're too self-absorbed to enter the conversation.

The Bible says from the start that the Creator made everything, and that He made it by speaking to it. He communicates his creations into existence, and he communicates logic, order, rationality into this world. We have logic, order and meaning because they were somehow at work in making what we experience here. Without understandable information, we would never have come up with the idea of logic and meaning. The Bible says it was already there in an intelligent, relational Creator before anything else existed.

We could say the same about his goodness. I'll reflect on that in Part 3.3.

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Part 3.3

Where does good come from?

What is the ultimate good? Why don't we have it? Who provides it? How do we receive it?

The word that repeatedly sums all that God speaks into existence, is the word “**good**.” In Genesis 1, God's creation is “good” in **verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25**. **Verse 31** says, “God saw *everything that He had made*, and look!—*it was very good*.”

Everything God does is good, because God Himself is the original Good, the ultimate Good. Every good comes from the Father of the Heavens who cannot be eclipsed (**James 1:17***).

What He speaks is for our good: “*Good and upright is the LORD; therefore He instructs sinners in His way*” (**Psalm 25:8**). He speaks to us to enable us to pursue good instead of destruction.

He calls us to use our senses to recognize the goodness He has spoken into existence: “Taste and see that the LORD is *good*” (**Psalm 34:8**). Our experiences of pleasure—good food, good sights, good sounds, good smells, good sensations—all point to the goodness and kindness of the Creator who gives so many enjoyable things and the ability to enjoy them.**

Those who trust God know that it is only a matter of time before he makes everything good: “I will thank you forever, because you have done it. I will wait for your name, for it is *good*” (**Psalm 52:9**). Our experience of delayed gratification only makes the good more pleasurable when it finally comes. Those who know God's goodness in the past are sustained by the hope of more good in the future. “Don't doubt in the dark what you have experienced in the light.”

I have heard (though I can't prove it) that the people of the frozen north have twenty different terms for snow, since they deal with it all the time, in every condition. The people of the Bible have many different terms for God's goodness. For example:

“**Righteous**” means that God is the ideal. He is fully good in what He is and does by every standard that matters. All righteousness is God's righteousness. We can have none of our own that doesn't originate with Him. If we are to be all we were made to be, we must get righteousness from Him.

“**Just**” means that God is the standard of good. God does not follow some other law that is more basic than He is; God is purely good and justified in all He is and does. We uphold justice because God is just. Justice, without a just God, would be arbitrary and meaningless.

“**Holy**” means that God is transcendentally good. He is the Creator and we are the created, so His goodness is original and essential, and any goodness we have is derivative. It all comes from Him. As fallen people, we need the eyes to see that His good is pure, and any good that we come

up with is impure and incomplete, awaiting the eternity when we are made whole and fulfilled in our relationship with Him.

“**Faithful**” means that God is relationally all good, never failing toward those who trust Him. We, incomplete and limited as we are, do not know or understand everything that God is doing in and around us, but we can know that God is good, worthy of our trust, and faithful to complete that which He begins in us and among us.

“**Glorious**” means that God is the ultimate beauty, the Source of all beauty and all pleasure. Except by the radiance of His original beauty in what He has made, we would never behold beauty or experience pleasure, or even have the ability to behold or experience good. As all truth is from Him, and all goodness is from Him, likewise all beauty is from Him. It is all reflective of the eternal beauty of the glorious God.

God has “given” creation to man, Genesis 1 says. He gives it that we, by enjoying it, would know and converse with the Glory that created it. “The heavens declare the *glory* of God and the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech” (**Psalm 19:1-2**).

As C.S. Lewis says, to enjoy anything is to praise it. We do not praise God merely because He demands it. We praise Him because we recognize the *Glory* that creates every enjoyment we have ever known.

So the Bible says it is foolish to set our hopes only on worldly values, undependable as they are. **1 Timothy 6:17** tells us not to be arrogant, but to rely on God “who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” That means when you have a good experience, you do not presume that you deserve it as if God owed it to you. And you do not assume you are simply a lucky person. You recognize the Giver of every good gift.

In the Bible, to “*glorify God*” is to acknowledge that every good comes from the Creator. And without Him we would never encounter good. We would not be able to enjoy it. We would not have any concept of good whatsoever. And we depend on the Giver for every good we hope to have in the future.

So the first truth is that everything else exists because it was created and is sustained by God, and the first thing to know about it is that all good is from God who is eternally good. And for those words to have any meaning, we must realize also that all truth comes from God who is eternally true. I will reflect on that in Part 3.4.

*The references in parentheses are the book, chapter and verse of the Bible to which I am referring, in case you want to read the larger context of those statements.

**The complaint against God that I hear most often is that he allows evil. If you’re going to enter evil as evidence against God, it seems only reasonable that you also account for good as evidence *for* God. At some point you have to account for the existence of good, or it is meaningless to complain about the existence of evil.

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Part 3.4

Where does truth come from?

One year my wife and I had a conference to attend in California. My youngest son was going along and said he would like to stop and see the Grand Canyon on the way. We drove through seemingly flat desert that looked like it must be low land, so I was surprised that the rim of the canyon was marked at 8,000 feet above sea level. We came to the edge and looked down at a river that was flowing 5,000 feet below us.

To say that the Grand Canyon is the deepest canyon in the world is to state a piece of information, but it doesn't begin to describe the experience of standing on the rim, looking across all the miles and all the geological formations and all the vivid colors and all the dizzying wonders of the Grand Canyon.

When early explorers first brought back reports of this Canyon, people had trouble believing it. And if I took photographs and posted them here, you would see shapes and colors, but you would not be experiencing the depth and glory of the Canyon. People who come to the rim and get that first look stand there in silent awe.

If you have not had that experience, you probably don't fully *understand* what I am saying, even if you believe me. You may think I'm describing a subjective, personal experience, and that may be fine for me, but it doesn't impress you. But your inexperience would not make the Canyon any less real or any less Grand.

God tells us of His eternal glory and power and goodness in two primary ways. First, He gives us His creation. Not only do we see, hear, smell, taste and feel wonders every day, but at times we are brought to tears by the beauty that exists.

The glory of creation is a reality we experience. We know there is a self-authenticating goodness here. We not only experience it with our five senses, but we have at the same time an awareness that some things are worthy to be valued and cared for, and some things are horribly abusive, and the abuse should not continue. I have never spoken with someone who did not believe there was good and bad in this world we inhabit. We all assume some things are better than others.

God tells us what has gone wrong, and I'll discuss that in Part 4. But that points to the second way in which God tells us of His eternal glory and goodness and power. He not only gives us creation; He also gives us His Word.

God is not incapable of communicating with His creatures. He gives us language, and He uses it to speak truth to us. Here are just the truth claims in the Bible:

“O Lord, the I AM, you are God, and your words are *true*” (2 Samuel 7:28).

“His way is perfect. The word of the LORD proves *true*” (Psalm 18:30).

“Every word of God proves *true*” (Proverbs 30:5).

“The LORD is the *true* God. He is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jeremiah 10:10).

None of this would have any meaning if God could not be trusted to speak to us what is true. Since He is the Creator of all, He is both the Source of all things and the Meaning in all He has created. Goodness and Truth are inseparable.

Because God is Good, because every other good flows out of His ultimate Goodness, then every true statement about Him is praise. If we speak the truth about God, we are speaking praise. Those who know Him study His revelation of Himself because they are compelled by the goodness that they continue to find there. They call attention to it because it is good.

If we speak the truth back to God, we are praising Him—not because *He* doesn’t know the truth, but because we turn from the truth into deception if we do not respond to His Word to us. If we speak the same truth to others, we are sharing His Good News. Both speaking His goodness to God and speaking it to others are voicing “the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9 ESV).

Without the eternal existence of actual Truth, we have no basis for believing anything. We cannot count on one piece of information being any more reliable than another. We can trust nothing. That is not freedom. It sounds to me like insanity.

Without the eternal existence of ultimate Good, we have no standard for evaluating anything. We cannot count on one object being better than another, one experience being more valuable than another, or one choice proving more beneficial than another. What would be better? Who is to say?

If it’s all relative, nothing you say, do or decide really matters, and no one can say that any thought has more merit than another. If “good” is not based on something more ultimate, then “good” is meaningless, and nothing in your life really matters. That is not living; that is nothingness.

We don’t get anywhere by leaving the good news behind. But if the eternally good and true God speaks the words of life to us, then we matter, and the life has meaning, and the world has value. It’s not about believing in yourself. It’s about trusting Him, knowing He’s eternally good and unfailingly true.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 4.1

Why is denial not a real option?

Here is an overview of what I have said so far: The essential plot of the Bible is the gospel, the Good Message through which we can have eternal life. The eternally good and true God created everything by speaking it into existence. He created good and true people to receive the goodness and truth that He speaks, and to reflect that goodness and truth back to him in a relationship.

He created us, male and female alike, in His image to know him. But we rejected him, his word, his goodness and his truth. We cut ourselves off from the Giver of all life, all goodness and truth. Our ruined condition is that rejection of eternal goodness and truth.

But God demonstrated both the grace of his goodness and the justice of His truth by making a way to restore us to himself. God, in all His goodness and truth, came to us as a man, Jesus the Savior. He lived a human life without ever rejecting goodness and truth. He died on the cross in our place, the Good in place of those who had rejected Good. He did it to save all those who will turn from their rejection and trust Him. He rose from death. By rising he revealed that justice has been fulfilled, and those who trust Him are no longer death-bound. They are alive in his grace. They have new life, which he will bring to complete goodness and truth.

In Part 4 I am thinking about our rejection of God's Good News. Here is how **Romans 1:16-25** describes it:

¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. (NIV)

An old riddle goes like this:

*As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives.
Each wife had seven sacks, each sack had seven cats, each cat had seven kits.*

Kits, cats, sacks and wives, how many were going to St. Ives?

We are tempted to do the math and come up with 2800 kits, cats, sacks and wives. But the true answer is, we don't know. Given the information, we know only that *I was going to St. Ives*. We are not told what direction the others were going. The point of the riddle is that you must pay attention to the words. If you begin with the wrong assumptions, you cannot come up with a correct answer.

We cannot come up with ideal life if we begin with people who are not ideal. We cannot know the gospel if we begin with people who are distorted by their rejection of the good and true Creator who is giving life to all things.

And we cannot know anything if there is no truth to be known. Agnosticism means literally that there is no knowledge. In theory, at least, an agnostic makes the claim, "I don't know any ultimate basis for truth, and I do not believe that anyone else does either." If we could not know, it seems to me that we could not compare ideas and say that any idea is better or more true than another. We would end up saying, "You cannot know ultimate values, so you cannot make value judgments." You cannot know, then, whether that statement has any meaning (or whether any statement has meaning).

We can't really live that way. We must go through every day assuming that certain realities are truthful: that gravity will keep me grounded, that depth-perception will help me avoid collisions with other objects, and that if I ask for two hamburgers, the burger-provider and I both understand what "two" means. We have learned these things as infants, and we are building on what we know.

Agnosticism is not humility. Humility is saying, "While I know some things, I don't know everything, and I have much to learn." Agnosticism says, "I don't know, and based on my ignorance I say that no one else knows either."

To trust the gospel is to give up agnosticism and accept humility. It takes humility to believe in Truth. We don't believe that we know everything, but we believe the Creator does. We do not claim to be the ultimate judges of good, evil, and everything in between. But we believe the Creator is both the judge and the ultimate standard of good.

Evil is a corruption of an original good. Evil is not a self-existing thing; it is a failure to be something. A water jug that can't hold water is not a new thing; it is a failed thing. It does not give a new definition to water jugs; it gives a false idea of what a water jug is.

So why do we avoid the good and true God? I'll look at that in Part 4.2

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 4.2

Why don't we want to hear the Good News?

Why do we avoid God, who is all true and all good? God not only *speaks* goodness and truth, but is Himself the *original, eternal* Goodness and Truth. When we have distorted ideas of him, we are not containing goodness and truth; we are failed containers, communicating un-good and un-truth. It seems self-evident that our human race communicates a lot of un-good and un-truth. We don't like to think about this, because it immediately informs us how "un-fine" we are. We want to be fine, and we're not.

If our thoughts are not in agreement with God's fully good and true thoughts, they are bad and false thoughts.

(By now you're probably very defensive about where this is going. I think we get defensive because we have had experiences in which un-good and un-true people have arrogantly belittled us. They have implied that they have a right to control or punish us while they remain unpunished and uncontrolled. I hate being controlled and punished by unworthy people just as much as you do. I just want you to know that is NOT where this is going. If it were, it would not be good news.)

We don't usually disagree with the idea that God knows everything and we don't. Among people who believe in the one God, nobody complains when I say God is all good and I am not. But it turns personal and offensive to our ears as soon as we hear that our thoughts and wills and actions are distorted by evil and falsehood.

I think this is why people choose agnosticism. Nobody really wants to hear that they don't measure up to the standard. It's far easier to dismiss that reality by saying, "But nobody else measures up either."

When you bring God into that picture, suddenly you're faced with a standard you can't measure up to. So the mere mention of God being eternally good and true causes us to recoil. We are so uncomfortable in the presence of Truth that we can't even think about the Good part. We can't handle the awareness of our own failure in goodness and truth—meaning that we cannot deal with our own sin.

But part of the Bible's good news is that our sin does not define us. In order to respond to the all-good, all-true God, I need to know that I can approach this God without being condemned. I need some hope of surviving the encounter.

If I felt miserable and went to the doctor, and my doctor said, "You're in terrible shape. You have to be put down. I'll go get my gun," I would want a second opinion. That information alone is not helpful.

It does not help to deny that we are seriously ill. We know something is wrong. But if the first thing we hear about ourselves is that we have violated God's truth and goodness and must, therefore, be destroyed, we cannot accept it. We cannot live with the half-truth that we are sinners. We must either deny it (which we all do to some degree), or we must know more than that.

We know we are broken people in a broken world. It does me no good to deny the existence of real Good and real Truth. And it is not much of an improvement to claim that goodness and truth are impersonal concepts in an impersonal universe.

So where does our help come from? It comes from the Source from which all goodness and truth come. To deal with our problem, we have to find an identity that is more basic than our brokenness, more original than our sin. I'm happy to see that the Bible gives us that Good News. I'll continue down that path in Part 4.3.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 4.3

What do we know about a person as a person was created to be?

Consider what **Genesis 1:26-27** says:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

(Notice that “man” refers to male and female. The term “man” is being used for our whole race, and it is not gender-specific in this context. God creates man in the image of God, male and female.)

The gospel is the power of God for our salvation. But we cannot understand ourselves, or our problem, or the salvation, if we begin with a broken image.

It is obvious that something is wrong with us. We don't like the tendencies of our race to do so many bad things. We don't like the falsehood that permeates our race. We all want improvement, but our race is as full of evil and deceit as ever.

And we cannot address the problem if we don't know what we would be like without the problem. We need a definition of ourselves that is more basic than our problem, more original than sin. It is not enough to say we are sinners. We need to know what it would mean to be one of us *without* our broken condition.

To fix a broken door latch, I need to know what a door latch is when it is not broken. To know how mankind can be restored, we need to know what mankind would be like if mankind were not broken. We need a destination that involves complete restoration. But to what would we be restored? You cannot imagine being restored if you do not know what the original good image was.

Fallen men and women need a definition and a destination. The Bible's definition is that we were made—before our problem began—in God's image. **So in what sense is man the image of God? I need at least four key ideas to answer that question.**

Man reflects the goodness and truth of the Creator.

Originally, this “image of God” was not un-good and un-true. That means we do not get our definition of the image of God from man as we know the creature in all our badness and falsehood.

We complain and get angry about the evil of what people do, or their *intent* to do harm, or their *desire* to make trouble, or even their careless *disregard* for others. Our complaint means that something is wrong. But if something is wrong, that means it has fallen short of the way it should be. If something should be different, there is a right, or a good, or a truth from which we have fallen.

The Goodness and Truth is God Himself, and we were created to reflect the **image** of that Good and True God—as a good mirror will accurately reflect not itself, but the likeness of someone else. The mirror is good and true to the degree that it reflects the true image.

A distorted reflection is a falsehood, not an alternative good.

We laugh at the distortions that fun-house mirrors give us, making our legs look too long or our heads look too big. We laugh because we know the image is distorted. But when we reflect a distorted image of the Good and True Creator, the results are not funny.

God is the original Goodness and Truth who speaks into being what reflects His goodness and truth. There is no other goodness and truth but His.

When we deny God's words and claim our ideas and ways are better than God's, we are not creating a new thing. Brokenness is not a new creation. Distortion is not an alternative truth. Distortion is un-true, a twisting of something good so that good is not being reflected truly.

Romans 3:23 says we all have sinned and *fallen short of the glory of God*. God has created us to be images of His truth and goodness. We have failed to reflect His truth and goodness. We have fallen so far short of His glory that, on our own, we can't imagine glory. We doubt that it even exists. **Our ruined condition is our rejection of the only Goodness and Truth.** Our rejection of God IS the brokenness.

Genesis 3 says our problem began with disbelieving what the Good and True God said. First the deceiver suggests that God may not be good and true. Then the deceiver says, "The best way to be like God is to be a god yourself! You can be an alternative god, having *your own* knowledge of good and evil, speaking *competing* words. Don't reflect *His* knowledge; make up your own!"

But that's a lie. There is no goodness or truth that is not the Creator's. Sin is not a creation; sin is a corruption. It does not exist on its own. Sin, by definition, is a failure to reflect the true goodness of God. Sin is not a thing, it is an anti-thing, an un-truth.

No person, whether human or demonic, can truly compete with God. When we try to, by claiming to have a better idea than God, we are not creating, we are denying. We do not speak new truth; we speak distortion. Evil is not a creation; it is only a corruption.

Sin is choosing to reflect a false god. Usually the false god is yourself. A mirror that reflects only itself is not a true mirror.

So we cannot combat sin simply by trying to stop it. The only way to overcome sin is by returning to the Goodness and Truth from which we have fallen away, by returning to God Himself, by receiving the Word He speaks.

Un-fallen man is in a good and true relationship with the Creator.

Before we, as a race, disbelieved God, before we fell short of His glory by choosing a false god, we had a good and true relationship with Him. We reflected His goodness and truth back to Him, and we reflected His goodness and truth to each other.

When God created man in His image, He created man in relationship. He created *them*, male and female. He said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (**Genesis 2:18**). So we do not see God’s goodness in isolated man. Man is essentially relational. I can’t be myself fully all by myself.

I won’t go into the Trinity or into gender relations at this point. Those are important topics for another context. My point here is this: When God creates man in His image, He does not create man to think of himself as an isolated individual. He creates man in plurality. Before we fell short of God’s glory, we reflected His goodness and truth in relationship—first a relationship with God, then relations with others.

When someone asked Jesus which commandment is most important, Jesus did not sidestep the question. He gave a straight answer: *Love the Lord your God* with all your heart, your soul and your mind. That’s first, He said, and second is: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (**Matthew 22:35-40**).

Our problem is a relational one.

God is good and true, and He created us as reflections of that truth and goodness, but we have fallen short of that glory, and we have fallen short by disbelieving God’s Word to us. We have chosen to reflect a false image, an image that is not glorious but horribly distorted, desperately lacking God’s goodness and truth.

We have a relational problem. We were created for good and true relationships with God and with each other. But we are not good and true images of God. We are false images, and the brokenness is in our relation to God, and therefore in our relations with each other. Apart from God, our lives and relationships cannot reflect God.

We can recognize the need for the goodness and truth we do not reflect. What do we need to understand about our ruined condition? I’ll ponder that in Part 4.4.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 4.4

What do we know about our ruined condition?

The image is shattered. Instead of God's Truth, we speak conflicting words. Instead of God's Goodness, we reflect a shattered image. We need to be restored to God's goodness and truth. We need the good news. We need to trust His Word. We need a restored relationship.

Romans 1:16-25 describes our need, and it also begins to put that need into its larger context. Verse 16 says the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Why do we need the gospel? These verses give us that answer in three parts.

We need to know why the wrath of God is Good News.

Verse 17 says the gospel reveals God's righteousness. Righteous means good, all that the creator meant us to be. All good is God's good. We can get that righteousness nowhere else. If we are to be restored, we need God's righteousness. That righteousness is revealed in the gospel.

Not only does the gospel reveal God's righteousness, but **verse 18** says it also reveals God's wrath. The good news includes the righteousness of God and the wrath of God. So we need to know how the wrath of God is Good News.

Imagine a culture that assumes suffering is the ultimate evil, that hardship is bad and should be avoided at all possible costs, and can't imagine the existence of something worse than physical pain. What if you grew up in a culture where the entire economy was driven by the idea that you should be as comfortable as possible, as stress-free as possible, and as entertained as possible? Imagine a culture of people with very short attention spans, people who were intensely preoccupied with their own pleasure. I can understand how people like that would have a hard time paying attention long enough to hear the truth, and a hard time believing that anything could be good enough for them. After all, they've devoted their lives to finding fulfillment, and the best they can do is more and more in-your-face entertainment. They are hyper-stimulated, but they are not fulfilled.

Why? Because they were not made to find fulfillment in themselves. They were made to love and be loved, to receive and reflect back eternal Goodness in relation with God and with one another.

What does this have to do with wrath? I remember an African brother who said, "It must be very hard to trust God in your culture." If our culture is built on the idea that our private happiness is the supreme good, then we chase after experiences and ignore the Source of all good. So when we hear that God is going to pour out His wrath on godlessness, people in our culture take personal offense. What right does God have to disrupt my personal pursuit of happiness?

But imagine a different culture, one in which people are more concerned with survival than with boredom, a culture in which people need relationships in order to survive. Imagine a culture in which people in power are openly corrupt, and those struggling to survive cannot get justice, because the power-wielders take what they want, and they step on others to get it.

People in those cultures who hear of God's wrath do not take offense. They ask, "Lord, why are you so patient? We need your wrath now! We are desperate for justice!" They see the obvious connection between God's love and His wrath, because they need God to display His wrath and deliver them from the evil that keeps them in misery.

The opposite of wrath is not your private happiness; the opposite of wrath is leaving this messed-up world the way it is. In the real world, the goodness and the wrath of God are inseparable. People who believe the Bible pray, "Come, Mighty King, and save us! Destroy evil! Destroy suffering and misery and the corruption that inflicts it."

But then, in the next breath we pray, "But be patient, because we know and love people who are choosing evil and deceptions instead of Your eternal goodness and truth." We need God's wrath to bring justice, but we also need God's patience to work grace. We can't have one without the other. We need a God who is both wrathful against evil and merciful to people who fall short of His goodness.

We need to know the truth of God's Word that we have suppressed.

Romans 1:18 says we have suppressed the truth. We go out of our way to silence God. We don't like hearing about the eternal standard of goodness and truth.

Verses 19-20 say God has given us enough information to know His truth. We can see in creation that God has given us every pleasure. If nothing was good, we would not complain that there is too little of it. Good must exist.

But, **verses 21-24** say, we make absurd use of God's good gifts. Instead of reflecting goodness back to the original Good One who gave it, we worship created things like a pack of fools. Instead of thinking according to eternal Truth, we distort the truth and abuse our bodies and our relationships. **Verse 25** says it all results from worshiping the creation instead of the Creator. We've traded away the Truth for a lie.

Why do we need the gospel? We need to be restored to Truth Himself. **Our ruined condition is our rejection of the only Goodness and Truth.**

We need to know the goodness of God's image that we have replaced.

Verse 23 says we don't value the glory of the immortal Creator of every good, because we prefer images of our own making. We have an image problem. In **Exodus 20** it is clear that God wants us to know Him, and the first thing He warns us not to do is make false images for ourselves.

That is not a law against all drawings, paintings, sculptures, photographs, or characters on stage or film. It is a warning not to stupidly worship those things in place of the living God. God is not a thing to be used. God is a Personal Being to know and be known by. He is the relational God who spoke all creation into existence by His Word, and speaks words to us that we would respond personally to Him. He is not a concept to be used and discarded. He speaks goodness and truth into us so that we can be full of His goodness and truth, reflecting it back to Him and to others. He is certainly more understanding and more relational than we imagine, but He is not less.

For me, it helps to think in stories, and I will give you a story about all this in Part 4.5.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 4.5

A Parable of the Broken Vessels

Suppose a lord had a beautiful set of glass goblets which he used to serve a wine of true goodness to his people. He knew they were desperately thirsty for his true goodness. He could have poured it directly down their throats, but he chose to make his love for them known by serving it to them in a far more humble and gracious way, in a matched set of goblets, which were beautifully formed to reflect his image

And suppose that his goblets fell, and they shattered into so many fragments that they were as dust, unrecognizable as the goblets they had been created to be, goblets formed to hold and deliver true goodness.

Suppose he took that dust, and gave it to his glass-blower, who could melt them down and breathe shape back into the glass. And he said, "Remake these vessels to match this image of mine."

Suppose, however, that the glass-blower thought, "True goodness is very valuable. I am afraid of spilling a single drop. It would make more sense to me to make it a different shape. If true goodness is to be poured into the common people, we need a vessel that is more functional."

So instead of fashioning the glass into the image the host had revealed, the glass-blower shaped it into a pitcher. A pitcher might serve to pour the true goodness directly into the thirsty people. Functionally, it seems more practical, more efficient.

But the lord said, "No, that is not how I choose to make my love known to my people. I do not choose a vessel of mere functionality to convey my true goodness. I choose vessels of relationship. I choose for the vessels themselves to be remade to reflect my image, as I have shown you.

"The true goodness is mine, the people are mine, the vessels are mine, the image is mine, and the way of serving the true goodness to the people is mine, in order that they would know the love that is mine."

What does the parable mean? The Lord desires to fill us with His truth and goodness. We are thirsty for it—even if we don't realize He is the only Source of the truth and goodness for which we thirst.

The Lord knows we're thirsty for Him. And He chooses to deliver His truth and goodness to us in the vessel of a trust relationship with Him through the gospel of His grace.

Now, consider the *extent* of the problem. Sin is our shattered condition. Sin is not merely a smudge here and there, some grime to wash away. Sin is not a substance on us that can be taken off of us. Sin is the condition of being fallen, broken, shattered into dust.

Sin means that we, His people, are in a shattered condition. Some people call it "*total depravity*." We do not even realize how broken we are. So we argue one of **two un-truths**:

First un-truth: Dust is normal. “Dust is all we ever were, all we ever can be, and all there is; Dust is normal.” This is a denial of God’s revelation to us that we were made to bear the Image of God. It is also a denial of our broken condition. If you start with dust alone, you cannot get to the point of containing Truth and Goodness. Shards of glass do not contain anything. Denial of your condition cannot lead you to the truth that saves you and gives you life.

I hear a lot of people making this claim. But it does me no good. It offers no hope.

Second un-truth: You must stop breaking by choosing to be un-broken. “We must reassemble the shattered pieces by focusing on the brokenness of each piece, one at a time, and putting each piece back in its proper place. If you still have cracks, you are unrepentant, and you need to get it together.”

I will think out the meaning of repentance in Part 6. My point here is that trying to address your sin condition by focusing on one sin at a time is hopeless. That is not how a shattered vessel becomes whole.

The first un-truth is the original sin of self-righteousness: I reject God as the only reference point for truth and goodness, and I define truth and goodness according to myself. “I am like God, knowing good and evil. I am the reference point. I am *self-righteous*. My dust is normal.” That’s a distortion.

The second un-truth is the religious version of self-righteousness: “God is the standard, and I must fess up to the various cracks of sin in my life, and I must un-break them. I am serious about the wrongness of my breaks, and from now on I will do all in my power to no longer have breaks, and I will instruct others to un-break themselves as well. I will give no one a break.” And that’s another distortion, an idea that won’t work.

Can you see how well-intentioned religion is, and how subtle the distortion is? The second untruth *sounds virtuous*, but it is self-righteous, a religious variation on the original sin.

Sadly, a lot of people who claim to believe the Bible make this their message. Some of them are well-intentioned, but their message doesn’t help. They aren’t realistic about the extent of the problem, and their proposed solution doesn’t work.

But there is more to the parable. The Lord does not choose to fill people with His truth and goodness by taking a utilitarian approach and impersonally pouring it down our throats. In other words, His Word does not merely tell us what truth and goodness is; it also tells us how His truth and goodness gets delivered.

You and I cannot remove our own brokenness by un-breaking one piece at a time. We must be remade. And we must be remade in the image of our Lord.

We, self-obsessed as we are, assume we could contain and deliver God’s truth and goodness better in a more functional image. We invent ways to pour truth and goodness directly down the throats of parched people.

And when we are thirsty for God but don't admit it, we even suggest that God is at fault for not force-feeding us. But none of us receives it well when we are actually force-fed, even if it is God's goodness that is being forced into us.

Everyone who receives the truth and goodness of God—through His Word spoken into us—is reborn, a new creation, a remade vessel for containing God's truth and goodness. The truth and goodness is His, not ours. (We can't create it; we can only get it from him.) The remade vessels are His, not ours. (We are not our own.) And the image for containing and delivering truth and goodness is His image, not our own.

Our ruined condition is our rejection of the only Goodness and Truth. We are saved through the Word of God. God chooses to deliver His truth and goodness to us by means of his story. And He delivers it to us not as an impersonal function, but in a relational way that makes His love known to us. God speaks Truth and Goodness into us by means of a relational vessel that bears His image.

How can we be loved without disregarding our most basic problem? How can we receive God's loving wrath without being destroyed ourselves? And where do we find an un-fallen Man in whose image we can be remade? That is the focus of Part 5.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.1

What is the salvation question, and who is the answer?

The good news of Christ is the power of God for our salvation (**Romans 1:16**). Salvation means that through the gospel God gives life instead of death, good instead of evil, truth instead of falsehood.

We began by seeing that there is good and bad in our world. If there were not, it would make no sense to say anything is better than anything else. But we are believing that certain things are worthy of praise whenever we spontaneously say, "Isn't that beautiful?" or "That was great!" And we know just as certainly—from cruel experience—that some things are evil and should not continue. If one experience can be better than another, there must be an original good from which we have fallen. Good means "as it should be," and bad means, "as it never should be." Good is the original, and bad is the departure from the good.

There must be truth and falsehood also. We know this because we have meaning. If meaning did not exist, we would not communicate. Words would have no meaning. We do communicate, and we do make decisions every day based on our understanding that some things are true and some things are false. Truth is what is, and falsehood is what is not. Falsehood is a deception, a distortion of the truth. There must be an original truth in order for falsehood to deny or distort it.

If the universe were random, we would never have thought of the idea of "random." But the universe is not random. We have evidence that good exists, and we have evidence that much has fallen away from goodness. We have evidence that truth exists, and we have evidence that much resists the truth.

The gospel begins with God, who is eternally good and true. All goodness and all truth come from Him. He is eternal, the Creator of everything else. He creates by speaking. His Word gives life. Everything He speaks is good, and everything He speaks is true.

We were created to reflect the eternal goodness and truth of God in relation with Him and with each other. But we have rejected God and fallen from His goodness and truth. We reject God by disbelieving His Word to us, choosing to be false gods rather than reflecting the true God. The image we reflect is not God's image. Apart from God, we are not good or true.

We have evidence of original good and original truth, and we have evidence that we are separated from them. We have a deadly problem.

How can we be saved? How can God bring an end to evil and falsehood without destroying us too? Where can we find an un-fallen image of God?

With those questions in mind, consider **John 1:1-18**. (I underlined some key phrases.)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John*. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' " ¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (NIV)

“What Jesus means to me” can be the deadliest distortion we make. Are the words “to me” keeping you from knowing the Giver of Life Himself?

The words “to me” may mean “this is immediately relevant in my situation.” If I ask, “What’s the capital of Montana?” You may answer, “It’s not important *to me*.” But if I know that my daughter went to the capital and is in trouble, it is important *to me*, meaning that the information is relevant to my situation. It matters *to me*.

People also use *to me* as shorthand for, “This is merely what I am thinking; you may think differently.” That’s an expression of humility. Yet if I say, “My parents got married in 1952,” my opinion has nothing to do with it. It either happened or it didn’t.

God became man, and died the death we deserve, and rose to life again, and calls us back into His goodness and truth through a trust relationship. Those are not “to me” statements. They are either true or false. The “to me” doesn’t come into play until I ask, “And what difference might that information make in my thinking?”

The Fall of mankind began by rejecting Truth in favor of personal opinion. So basing your hope on your opinion may be keeping you from spiritual life.

If God has spoken goodness and truth, if He created us in the image of His goodness and truth, but we have disbelieved His Word and shattered the image, then restoration can come from only one Source: the same Creator from whom all goodness and truth comes.

But how has that Creator made Himself known? That is what I will address in Part 5.2.

Footnote:

*In verse 6 John the Apostle is writing about John the Baptizer. It is confusing if you don't realize these are two different men named John:

The author of this Gospel is John the Apostle. Jesus chose twelve men to follow Him. They were called "apostles" because "apostle" was a Greek term for someone sent on an official mission, and Jesus sent them as messengers of His good news. John the Apostle wrote five of the books included in the Bible: the Gospel (known as "John"), the Revelation, and the three epistles (letters) known as 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John.

All four Gospels introduce John the Baptizer before we meet John the Apostle. We have no writings from John the Baptizer. He was a prophet sent from God to prepare people for the arrival of the Savior Jesus. Part of his work was to baptize (or immerse) people in water as a symbol of being washed clean from their old thinking and being raised up ready to follow the Savior.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.2

How has God made himself known?

In her book *The Mind of the Maker*, novelist Dorothy Sayers says it helps to recognize that God is a wordsmith. He's a Creator, one who creates by His Word, and we have to understand the creative process to understand God.

The creative process, she explains, proceeds from the mind of the creator. What an author reveals will be an original idea. For others to experience that idea, it will have to be incarnate in some form. It will be put into words to be seen, read and heard. The original idea will be made known through the "incarnate word," meaning the idea must be put into some form that people can experience and know for themselves. When people take in the words, they now have the idea in themselves. They can share the idea, because the creator has put the idea in words they can know.

The original idea exists before it is made known. When the original idea is made incarnate, by putting it into words, it is still the same idea, not a different idea. And when you or I receive the incarnate words, we have the same idea present and at work in us.

What our eternally good and true Creator reveals of Himself is that He is the Source of all goodness and truth. But for us to know Him, we need to receive His original goodness and truth in some incarnate form. The original idea of God Himself must be made flesh. God, in the flesh, must be the same God, not a different God, or we would not know the Creator through His incarnation. The incarnate Word must be the same goodness and truth as the Creator. And when we receive God's Word-made-flesh, it must be the same God who is alive in us, or we do not have the Truth or the Goodness. He must be the same God: Origin, Incarnation, Indwelling Presence—because if we do not receive the eternal Goodness and Truth, we are still separated from God.

The Good News is that God *has* sent His eternal Goodness and Truth to indwell us again and restore us to the image of our Creator, through the incarnate Word.

The Creator makes Himself known to us through the creative process. In the Bible He calls the eternal Goodness and Truth "Father," and the incarnation of His Goodness and Truth "Son," and the indwelling presence of His Goodness and Truth "Spirit." They're all the same original Goodness and Truth; there is no other.

Please understand: He is not an abstract concept. He's fully personal and relational. He is not less personal and relational before He is made flesh, or after. He is not less loving before He is born in a manger or after He ascends from the earth. He has the same passionate devotion to the good and true eternity for His people in His eternal Mind, and in His human Body, and in His indwelling Spirit.

In that way, Sayers helps me understand the opening words of *The Gospel According to John*. This passage describes for us God's way of restoring shattered people to His eternally good and true image. We'll look at John's answer to the salvation question in the next four sections of Part 5.

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Referenced work: Sayers, Dorothy, *The Mind of the Maker*, 1941, 1968, London: Harper & Row. I recommend this book for anyone trying to understand Trinity. It is also insightful for anyone thinking through the artist's creative process. The description here is my own based on the ideas Sayers puts forth in this book.

Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.3

How is Jesus the meaning of life?

(This is a continued explanation of John 1:1-4.)

John's Gospel introduces to us the Person who is the answer to the salvation question.

When Jesus was here in the flesh, John (the author) knew Jesus personally. John was one of the twelve men Jesus called to follow Him and bear witness to what He did in the flesh. John was with Jesus on the mountain when Jesus gave them a glimpse of His heavenly glory (**Luke 9:28-36**). John was with Jesus when He was arrested (**Mark 14:32ff**). John was the only one of the twelve who was in the crowd who watched Jesus die on the cross (**John 19**).

Near the end of this Gospel, John tells us why He wrote it. John wrote this Gospel to introduce us to the Life-Giver: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (**20:31 ESV**).

John's purpose is that we would trust the truth and goodness of God's Word. By this restored trust we can have life in Him—as opposed to death apart from Him.

What does **John chapter 1** tell us about God's way of saving us?

Jesus is the Living Word of God by whom we may have New Life. (verses 1-4)

Originally, John was not writing to 21st-century people. He was writing to people in a 1st-century Greek culture. He was using terms and concepts which they understood, but which we misunderstand if we do not find out what John was talking about and what His terms meant.

In **verses 19-20** he tells us he is talking about **the Christ**. John's Greek audience already had the concept of a "Christ," a Savior from Heaven. John's Jewish people had the Old Testament Scriptures foretelling this **Messiah** who would bring salvation. (Messiah is the Hebrew term, and Christ is the Greek term for this Savior.) From **verse 29** on we see that John is talking about Jesus. But in verse 1, John chooses to introduce Jesus the Christ as "the Word" or, in Greek, the LOGOS.

What did LOGOS mean when John used that term?

LOGOS is the root of our word logic, and the "-logy" in terms such as *biology* (the LOGOS of living things) and *anthropology* (the LOGOS of people) and *theology* (the LOGOS of God). LOGOS meant far more than a "word." It meant language, meaning, the ability to form coherent thoughts and communicate relationally.

Ancient cultures understood that this ability to reason with each other came from somewhere, that it would not have happened at random, that it was given to mankind from the spiritual realm,

making us more than mere beasts, enabling us to share in something divine. LOGOS was what gave mortal men a connection with THEOS.

What was the relationship of LOGOS to THEOS?

(If you find this section too difficult to follow, feel free to skip to Part 5.4.)

Now, try to enter with me into conversation with first-century Greek people. They had different ways of saying things, and different assumptions behind them, but they weren't totally different from us. They weren't idiots.

They understood that behind everything in the material world was a spiritual power. Don't think superstition; think a cause behind the effect. We may think of matter as basically dead pieces interconnected like a cosmic machine. They could not overlook the fact that everything was in motion, dynamic, alive by some Energy. They did not pretend that this intricate world, our amazing environment and the very minds we have to interact with it all came from nothing.

They didn't think of the spiritual realm as something less real than the material. The spiritual realm was the awesome reality of which we are a shadow. We are somehow a poor reflection of some more ideal good, some more profound truth.

We share some of their same ideals. We ache desperately for true love that is not shallow, for profound truth that is not trite, for purpose that makes our lives meaningful. We find ourselves in a culture that mocks the things that make life worth living by depersonalizing them, calling them corny, old-fashioned, naïve. But without them our relationships die and life is unlivable.

The Greeks thought of them as intensely personal—not in the *private* sense but in the living, relational sense. Their term for the powers behind the things we experience was “gods.” Myths were personifications of the wonders of nature and the virtues or vices of human experience. Myths described ideas in relational terms.

And the power behind all the powers, was the essence of all dynamism, “god-ness” itself. The Greek term for this is THEOS.

But the Bible came from the Hebrews, to whom God had revealed Himself as the only God, creator of everything, heavens and earth. He is not many, but One. He is personal, He speaks, He gives life by His Word, and what He speaks is goodness and truth. His name is I AM.

John did not talk down to the Greeks. He used their vocabulary. In his Gospel, John, with all the New Testament authors, is introducing this God, Creator of all, to peoples whose common language is Greek. He uses the Greek term for god-ness, the spiritual power behind all powers: THEOS. All the way through the New Testament, the term which we translate “God” is the Greek word THEOS.

These Greeks also had the idea that the material realm was limited by evil, and that the pure THEOS, God, would not have contact with evil. To have any connection with THEOS, people

would need an intermediary which only THEOS, God, could provide. And that intermediary was LOGOS, the Word.

LOGOS was what THEOS gave to humanity so we could be more than mere matter, more than the beasts. Through LOGOS, we could gain connection with THEOS. Through the Word, we can know God.

What would John and his original audience have understood these verses to mean?

John begins his Gospel by saying: “*In the beginning was the Word.*” From the beginning the LOGOS already was. Eternal *Meaning* existed before this universe.

“*... and the Word was with God . . .*” They would understand that the LOGOS, the meaning, the language, the rationality, *the Truth* was already with God, THEOS, before people existed.

“*... and the Word was God.*” So while this LOGOS, this Word, this Language, this Truth is in one sense distinct *from* God, yet THEOS is the essence of Truth, and LOGOS is THEOS. God is not untrue. All Truth comes from God. He is the original Truth.

“*He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.*” If it had a beginning, it began with Him. If it is a part of the whole, ordered Creation that is interconnected by the observable dynamics of material physics, then God made it, and He made it through the Word, through speaking it into being in the universe of stunning design. Through the LOGOS, through Truth, God made a universe in which things are fundamentally understandable. Without LOGOS, there would be no such universe and no understanding.

“*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.*” This LOGOS is not an abstract concept. Modern people imagine impersonal abstraction. But the Meaning of all things is not a mere concept. We didn’t think up Him; He thought up us. He is not less real than His creation. He is personal, and He is the Giver of all life, and the life He gives is the light of men.

What is light? It is what enables us to see what is real. Darkness is the inability to see. Darkness means whatever is there, we can’t see it. Light is what gives sight.

Life is dependent on the LOGOS. And without that life, we can’t know what is real. We’re in the dark. We need the life that comes only through God’s Word. John is saying, “You want knowledge from God? You want to be able to make sense of things? You want to know the meaning of life? I’ll tell you about Him.” This is how John introduces Jesus.

If Greek thought is too much for you, you might find Hebrew thought more practical. The author of Hebrews begins: “In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (**Hebrews 1:1-3 NIV**).

So Hebrews and Greeks alike are expected to understand that Jesus is God's Word to us, the One through whom the universe was made, the One who sustains all things, the Source of life and truth. If I am wrong about Him, I am not choosing *my own way* to eternal life; I am rejecting the only eternal life there is.

So what is John saying about God's way of restoring His fallen people?

God's way of restoring fallen people and a fallen creation is through the Life that created it in the first place and is sustaining its existence: His life-giving Word, His eternal goodness and truth—embodied in a Man. God gives life by speaking, and now He has spoken the Living Word into the material world. Jesus is that Living Word.

How does John describe Jesus? We'll look at that in Part 5.4.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.4

How is Jesus the Light of the world?

(This is a continued explanation of John 1:1-9.)

Jesus is the True Light by which we can see. (verses 5-9)

⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. ⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (NIV)

What does it mean that the “Light of men” was in the LOGOS?

John’s audience had a long-term understanding that light somehow represented the revelation of God to men. So “light” is another way of saying God’s eternal goodness and truth. “Darkness” is another way of saying the denial of that goodness and truth.

The Light shines, and the darkness doesn’t get it.

That is a fairly literal way to translate **verse 5**. Translators debate whether John means “the darkness has not *understood*” the light (NIV) or “the darkness has not *overcome*” the light (ESV). But both are true. The term comes from the idea of catching something, as you might catch a ball thrown to you. The darkness has not *taken hold of* the light. It doesn’t get it. It doesn’t understand the light, and it doesn’t have any control of the light.

Verses 10-11 say the same thing in relational terms. God came in person, and the world, His people, did not know Him. They don’t get it. They’re still in the dark. Why?

Announcing the Light is different from being the Light.

God sent a man named John. John the author is not talking about himself. He’s talking about the one we call John the Baptist. John the Baptist was famous. People found his preaching about the coming Messiah so compelling, they began to wonder if John himself was the Christ. He wasn’t, and he said he wasn’t. He said Jesus is.

John was not the Light. John was announcing the Light. There is a difference. To this day, some people will be shaped so profoundly through a teacher that they will start to speak as if the teacher were the Source of all truth. That’s false. No teacher is the Light. We cannot think up new light. We only announce the Light.

Or, Christians can sound so overbearing that non-Christians think Christians are *claiming to be* the Source of all truth. I’m sorry it sounds that way. I am not the Light. I can’t offer new or different light. I’m only telling you about the Light who has come into the world.

Verse 9 says the Light was coming. Jesus was coming. Jesus *is* the Light. John was merely announcing the Light. Jesus *is* the revelation of all Truth. Jesus is the Light of God that enables us to see what is real. **Colossians 1:15** says, “*He is the Image of the invisible God.*”

What’s that again? Jesus Christ is the *Image of the invisible God*. By our rejection of God, we had lost the ability to see. We were spiritually blind (2 Corinthians 4:4). By disbelieving God, we lost the image we were created to reflect. We can’t see what we deny. By refusing the only Source of good and truth, we see only darkness. We are a darkened race. Who will reveal THEOS to us?

The true Light came into the world, the Image of the God we couldn’t see.

What is John saying about God’s way of restoring fallen people?

God’s way of restoring fallen people is through His Light replacing our darkness. We can see Truth and Goodness only in the light of Christ. He is the Creator from which we have been estranged. He came and people didn’t receive him. But what does it mean to receive him? That is the question of Part 5.5.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.5

What does it mean to receive the Christ?

(This is a continued explanation of John 1:1-13.)

New Life is dependent upon receiving Him.

Here is how John 1:10-13 says it:

¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. (NIV)

We don't receive Him.

Our original problem continues: When we knew God, we rejected Him and chose distortion and deception. Without Him, we're too broken to recognize Goodness and Truth when He comes to us in the flesh.

When you've been in the dark too long, light feels harsh. You recoil. You cover your eyes. You say, "Get that light out of my eyes." It doesn't matter what beauty might be there to see.

Our Light has come, and we don't receive Him. We are so fearful of losing our little spider holes of darkness that we hate Goodness and Truth when he comes in the flesh. We view Him as an annoyance, an interruption to our important schedules, a threat to our agendas, a Word to be silenced, a Light to be snuffed out.

Those who do receive Him are born of God.

"*But to those who received Him . . .*" How? If we haven't received Him, how do we receive Him? **Verse 12** explains: ". . . *those who believed in His name . . .*" What does that mean? It means they trust His character. They stop denying Him, and they *love* His goodness, and they *trust* His Word. They give up the falsehood that they can do better than His good. They stop claiming that they can find something truer than His truth. They stop denying, and they believe in the Original LOGOS, the Source without whom nothing goes well, and nothing has any meaning.

Those who believe Him are born of God. It's not a genetic birth. It's not a man-made conversion. Verse 13 is saying you don't pick your way to eternal life out of a menu. You are dependent on God to birth you into a new creation through believing His Word.

What comes between verses 11 and 12?

What happened so that we who did not receive Him in verse 11 can receive Him in verse 12?

Jesus did something to uphold forever the truth of God and the goodness of God. John will go on to tell the story of what Jesus did. The whole New Testament tells us what Jesus did. He lived not by our distorted values, but by eternal values. He taught not our twisted words, but His life-giving words. He delivered not our distortion, but His truth. He related to others with a down-to-earth purity, not a fake niceness.

And then He died a death He did not deserve. The One through whom we were made took our rejection on Himself. All our spite for His Word, all our vandalism of His beautiful creation, all our adultery in the face of His faithfulness, all the brokenness of our existence was laid on Him. He took the consequence of our choices onto Himself, and in exchange He gave us new access to eternal Goodness and Truth through a new faith in Him.

How can God work goodness and truth, and pour out His desperately-needed wrath against evil and falsehood, without destroying His fallen creatures? How can we, who rejected Goodness and Truth, be saved from our evil and falsehood and restored to Him? He, the LOGOS, took that wrath upon Himself so that we could be reconciled to Him, no longer separated from the Giver of all good and truth.

Jesus calls for this renewed trust all the way through John's Gospel. He dies, and he rises, and he calls us again. We need to see by the light of God-in-the-Flesh dying on the cross (**chapter 19**), because that is God's mercy and justice in one suffering Body. We need to see God-in-the-flesh risen and gently speaking His words to His friends again (**chapters 20-21**), because that is how we are to know Him and make Him known until He returns.

John's whole Gospel fits between verses 11 and 12.

What is John saying about God's way of restoring fallen people?

We cannot do it. We have been trying to do life on our own, apart from the only Source of Goodness and Truth. We have appointed ourselves the life-sources, the arbiters of goodness and truth, and that has to stop. He has spoken, and we have ignored Him.

But He has done what only He could do to uphold mercy and justice at the same time. He took *our* brokenness and gave us His wholeness. He took our fallen, shattered condition in order to give us a new life through faith in *His* goodness and truth.

So what can we know by knowing Jesus? That is summarized in Part 5.6.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 5.6

What characterizes Jesus?

(This is a continued explanation of John 1:1-18.)

We can know Goodness and Truth again through the Word who became flesh.

John summarizes what Jesus embodied as “grace and truth.” Notice he says it twice:

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' " ¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (NIV)

God revealed His glory through His Word.

God spoke to us tangibly. Jesus is the greatest possible evidence that God is not distant and uncaring about broken people in a fallen world. God came in Person, THEO-LOGOS Himself, the breathing, walking *Theology*, and spoke audible words. He chose real people to deliver the News, the Message, the Gospel, to announce the Light in the material world. God reveals His glory in His living Word.

God revealed His glory in the Flesh.

We have false images, so we need the True Image of God. We live idolatry, so we need the glory of God. We know alienation, so we need faith in Him. We have seen His Creation, but no one has seen THEOS . . . until His glory “moved into the neighborhood” in human form (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*).

So the eternal Word became flesh, and we have *seen* His glory—displayed in the goodness and truth He showed and spoke, displayed on the cross, displayed in His risen Body. God has displayed His eternal goodness and His eternal truth in a flesh-and-blood Man.

That Living Word was fully Good.

Jesus is full of grace, and we receive grace from Him. What is grace? Grace is *goodness* to those who don't deserve it. Any good enjoyed by people who have rejected God is grace. God taking on my suffering and dying my death is *saving* grace.

Verse 17 says, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Where will we find the good and the truth that we lost? In him. He is full of grace and truth. He gives undeserved goodness and truth, *the* Good Truth, the gospel.

Is God fully good toward me? Would He grow goodness back into my messed-up life? Would God save *me* from *my* fallen condition? Look at Jesus and see the answer.

That Living Word was fully True.

In **chapter 14**, Jesus says, “Stop being troubled in your hearts. Trust into God; trust into Me. . . I will come again and take you to myself, in order that you may be where I AM. You can see the way.”

Thomas says, “Lord, we can’t see where you’re going. How can we see the way?”

Jesus, using the name of the true God, says, “I AM the Way. I AM the Truth. I AM the Life. You come to the Father only through Me” (**14:1-6**).

So, back in chapter 1, John begins His Gospel by saying: Truth is not just an abstract concept. Truth is a Person. Jesus does not deny Truth; He embodies it. He is the Truth through which everything else came into existence. When He enters His fallen creation in the flesh, He is not surrendering His truth; He is full of truth. If we get it, we get it from Him.

Can I make sense of life? Would God show me what way to go? Who can I trust? Look at Jesus and see the answer.

So how can we be restored to God, with all His Goodness and Truth?

Look at Jesus. “Jesus Christ” *means* “Anointed Savior.” He is God’s way of saving His fallen people. **We can have Goodness and Truth again through Jesus Christ.**

The Bible is saying: Look at Jesus. Hear the Word. Let your eyes adjust to His light. Don’t stay conformed to the broken world; be transformed in His image. Believe Him. Trust Him. Stop denying the true Source of Goodness and Truth, and receive new Life.

How can we do that? That is the topic of Part 6.

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Know God's Good News Personally

How the Bible shows grace and truth in a relationship

Part 6.1

How can we respond to God?

Have you ever had someone stomp on your heart? I don't mean literally; I mean the way someone can make you feel. You go to great pains, great personal sacrifice, out of your deepest love for someone. You're not looking for credit or thanks. The joy will be in seeing them happy. And then they dismiss your act of love as unimpressive or, worse, some kind of insult. Can you recall what it feels like when someone stomps on your heart?

Imagine what extraordinary humility God must be showing when He speaks all creation into being, and gives us the whole epic story of His saving love for His people, and we say something like, "Talk is cheap. Words don't really mean anything. Why don't you give me what I really want?"

If that illustrates our general response to the Live-Giver, maybe it explains why a lot of us don't really call on the Lord until we're desperate.

Before we look into the response that Romans 10 calls for, I'll review the central message of the Bible in four essential ideas:

- 1. The Creator is true and good.** The only God, who is eternally good and true, who creates everything by His Word, is the Speaker of the Word by which we may be saved.
- 2. We are broken and need to be restored.** Created to reflect God, we have fallen and shattered His image. Our main problem is that, instead of speaking His goodness and truth back to Him, we disbelieve His Word, make up ideas that are not true, and speak those ideas instead of His Word. Our ruined condition is our rejection of the only Goodness and Truth.
- 3. The Creator came to us in the flesh to die in our place and rise to begin new creation.** God spoke His Living Word into His creation. The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. His goodness and truth were revealed gloriously in His gracious death for people who don't deserve it, and in His true resurrection, vindicating everything He had said. If we receive Him, He makes us His children through a spiritual birth into His new-creation family.
- 4. If you trust the Lord's good news, you will be saved.** What response to this gospel is a good one and truthful one? That question is being answered in **Romans 10:1-17**. (Again, I underlined some key phrases for emphasis.)

¹Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." ⁶But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or "Who will descend into the deep?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" ¹⁶But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" ¹⁷Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (NIV)

I will try to explain this in Part 6.

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Part 6.2

What is a truly good ending to the story?

You probably know this story: Boy loves girl; girl scarcely knows he exists; boy is the true hero of the story; girl desperately needs a hero to save her. *What must happen next?*

Or perhaps this one is familiar to you: Helpless people are threatened by a ruthless enemy. Their only hope is to go humbly to a lone hero whom they had wronged and made an outcast, and to beg for His return. When he does return, *what should he do?*

Or maybe this plot is closer to home: The parent passionately desires for the child to do well. The parent brought the child into the world. The parent sacrificed countless resources to feed the child and nurture the child to health. The parent lovingly taught the child to walk, be kind to others, to read, pray, to work. But the child rebels and grieves the parent to the core. *What would be a good outcome for that story?*

These plots were not invented by Hollywood, nor did they first appear in paperback novels or someone's collection of fairy tales or fables. The Bible says each of them is about the main plot of all creation.

The Bible tells the main plot in each of these ways: God is a loving Man spurned and disgraced by the woman He loves. But she is enslaved, and if He would have her, He must buy her for Himself, forgive her harlotry, and make her His bride.

God is a rejected Savior. The people who made Him an outcast are being crushed by a ruthless enemy. If they are to be saved, it will be by the lone Hero they have rejected.

God is a loving Parent who brought His children into the world, fed and provided for them, taught them how to walk, how to get along, gave them words to read, taught them to pray, gave them meaningful work. But they have rebelled and grieved Him. Still, He humbled Himself, even unto death in their place, to reconcile them to Himself.

You can read each of these stories in the Bible. Each of them tells the main plot of the whole Story, of the whole of God's written Word to His desperate people. The Bible calls this main plot the gospel, the message of God's goodness, God's truth. That gospel tells us how we may be saved.

We have a Main Character, the Creator upon whom the entire plot depends. He's the good guy, true and faithful. Without the Main Character, we have no measure of a good ending, no meaning to the true story, no meaning whatsoever.

We have a main problem, a suppression of the truth, an estranged relationship: All people having rejected, ignored and disgraced the Main Character. Without a diagnosis of the essential problem, we will not welcome salvation.

We have a climax, a saving act. The Main Character has humbled Himself. He has come to those who had rejected Him, and He has lain down His life to save them. Without the saving work of the Main Character, there is no salvation, only death—final separation from the body, final separation from relationship, final separation from all goodness and truth.

In the gospel, we have the Main Character, the main problem, and the saving act. Then what? So far, we have the whole plot, except for the ending.

The essential problem is a rejection of the Main Character. The story is not resolved until someone is actually reconciled back to the Main Character. Does the boy get the girl, or is she still disinterested in him? Do the townspeople recognize the value of the lone hero, or do they still want no part of him? Is child reconciled to parent, or does the child remain estranged? We remain unfulfilled until those questions are answered. Good News must include truth about God, man, Christ . . . and a response.

In *theological* terms—the THEOS who creates and saves through the LOGOS—the question is vital. Do you love the Main Character, or not so much? Do you welcome Him as the law in your town, or not really? Have you stopped intentionally avoiding Him, or are you still a runaway child?

The story remains incomplete without a response. What do we need to know in order to respond? That is what I'll try to answer in Part 6.3.

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6.3

To be saved, what must I know?

That's the question, and we need the Bible's answer.

You have to know who the Main Character is. You have to know whose story it is. Take Robin Hood out of his story, or Snow White out of her story, and the rest of the characters become insignificant. You have to know who the Main Character is. You have to know the eternally good and true God who spoke the whole story in words if you're going to know salvation. There is no life apart from Him.

You have to know what the real problem is. The problem is defined by what has been lost. To celebrate the Titanic found at the bottom of the Atlantic without mentioning that it once sailed on the surface is somewhat dishonest. Sunken ships come from floating ships.

If you dig up and display the bones of a mastodon but insist that no such creature ever existed, your story lacks credibility. Mastodon bones come from living mastodons.

Death points to the existence of life. Evil is a corruption of something good, so it points to the existence of original good, not the non-existence of it. Separation from the eternal Giver of all good is the fundamental problem. Sin is separation from God, so it is spiritual death. Without knowing that, you will not desire or accept salvation.

You have to know that the Main Character's saving act truly saves. There is no salvation if the Main Character's action did not actually save anyone. You belittle the Savior whenever you deny that He actually saves. If He is not sufficient to save, you cannot be saved. If He did not take your sin to the grave, then you are still unsaved. If you are not somehow risen with Him, then you are still spiritually dead. If no one is actually saved, then there is no true salvation.

But if you know that the Creator is the eternal Source of all goodness and truth, if you know that your essential problem is that you are separated from Him and you have lost His goodness and truth, and if you know that He has come in the flesh to take your brokenness to the grave and rise to remake you in His good and true image, THEN, the question remains, "By what means does He apply that truth in my life?"

How does salvation replace our fallen condition? How does salvation practically change our lives from brokenness to God's goodness, from falsehood to God's truth? What must I do to be saved?

The Bible answers those questions with several terms that are somewhat synonymous. In Parts 6.4 through 6.8 I'll point out five terms that describe the response of those who are saved.

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Part 6.4

With what does a saved person agree?

When Jesus began to teach publicly, the first word He spoke was a term God had spoken all through the Old Testament. Jesus said, “*Repent*, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here” (**Matthew 3:2**). “Repent and believe the gospel” (**Mark 1:15**).

Through the Bible, *repent* is one of the main terms used to describe the difference between people God has saved and people who are still dead in their evil and falsehood. You won't find the term *repent* in Romans 10, but the idea is there. And we need to understand it, because we sometimes misuse it as if it meant “say you're sorry” or “change your behavior.” People who repent may be sorry about something, and they may change their behavior, but if you do either of those without repenting, you're still lost.

Repent comes from the Latin for “think again.” Your thinking is not true and not good; think again. *Repent* translates the Hebrew Old Testament word and the Greek New Testament word which both mean *think again*. Change the way you are thinking. Your way of seeing things is based on a falsehood, a broken relationship with the Creator. Replace it with the Truth, a restored relationship with the Savior.

When Jesus said, “Repent,” He tied it to the presence of Heaven's King: “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here.*” God dwells eternally in the realm of radiant goodness and life-giving truth. He is the source of all goodness and truth. And when God comes in the flesh, He is full of grace and truth.

So He does not come to say, “Stay the same, everybody. I only wanted you to know that your messed-up lives in this messed-up world are really not a problem. I rather like them this way, so if you're dying, that's really no concern of mine. Sorry for the interruption. You can go back to ignoring me now.”

No, Jesus introduced Himself by saying, “Think again. You have made a colossal mess of things because your understanding is based on misinformation and destruction. But the Creator, who speaks eternal goodness and truth, is not absent. You only *think* He is absent. Think again. To address the problem I've even come in the flesh. Begin all over with Me. I really am the Center of the universe. Think again; the King of eternal goodness and truth is here.”

The problem is that we, by disbelieving God's words to us, have chosen to base our lives on deceptions. We've built our lives, our way of thinking, on swampland, so we've rotted and crumbled. God, even when He was here in the flesh, said, “Your whole perspective needs to wake up to eternal reality. Think again, and this time, make Me the foundation of your thinking.”

So repent does not mean “Be self-righteous, take control of yourself, and prove to God and everyone else that you deserve respect.” That’s the problem: We think self-righteously by thinking that good and evil is based on our own ideas and our performance.

But doing it on your own is not repenting—even if you’re trying to show God how good you are. No, *repent* means: “Change your thinking. Are you ignoring your Creator? Have you forgotten that you depend on Him for any and all goodness? Are you denying your Savior? Are you acting as if the eternally Good and True does not exist? Are you, by your choices, perpetuating the problem? Are you thinking a falsehood? Think again. Recognize that the Giver of Life is here.”

Repenting is not being self-righteous; repenting is **agreeing** that God is the Source of all goodness and truth.

So repenting is agreeing with God: He *is* good. He *is* true. He *is* the way, the truth and the life. Ignoring Him is destructive. He is full of grace and truth. He bore your sin on the cross. He rose from death. He is the assurance of eternal life. In Jesus you are a new creation. To repent is to stop denying Him and to agree. If you agree with the Lord about His good news, you will be saved.

Romans 10 gives several other terms for agreeing with the good news of Jesus. I’ll describe the next one in Part 6.5.

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Part 6.5

On whose goodness does a saved person depend?

(This is part of an explanation of Romans 10.)

I've noticed that when someone tells me what I have to do, I want to resist it on principle. I have to be convinced that doing it is a good idea. We don't easily agree. But when we resist what God tells us to do, we can get ourselves into major troubles.

Remarkably, God does not assume that we will submit without understanding. All through the Bible He is reasoning with us. Through His Word He gives us understanding. He grants us repentance (**Acts 11:18**). He enables us to think differently. He does not save us through passion alone, but through agreement with what He says.

Your passion may seem impressive, but it does not save you (verses 1-2). In Romans 10, verse 1, Paul is praying that His people will be saved. The problem, verse 2 says, is that our zeal is misinformed. If our passion for God is not in agreement with the Truth, we still need to be saved. Honesty is no virtue if you're honestly misinformed.

What specific knowledge do we lack? Look at **verse 3**: *Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.*

We don't know God's goodness, because we try to do our own (verse 3). The Bible introduces us to lots of people whose misdirected zeal led to disaster: Abraham, Moses, Peter and Paul are some of the most glaring examples.

This is the essence of our problem. We are eager to build our own righteousness, our own ideas of good. But apart from God, our goodness does not exist. All good is from God. So our problem is, we do not **submit** to God's goodness.

Repenting is a change in understanding; Submitting is a change in relationship.

When we are told to submit, some of us get uncomfortable, because we have had painful experiences of being forced to submit to bad rules or abusive leaders. It is important to see the difference between submission to abusive human leaders and submission to a good and true Savior. Be very cautious of human leaders who demand submission but abuse their authority. In Jesus we don't find abuse.

Submit means literally, "under orders." Living things function according to interconnected realities. That which is not under an ordered relationship to something else is life-destroying. Your body is under the order of the central nervous system. Any body part that is not submissive to the rest is either sick, wounded, or dead.

My body has caused me all kinds of pain. One of the reasons, I learned, is that I do not breathe properly when I sleep. If my lungs do not function, everything else suffers. Each part of my body must function for the good of the rest. Without that submission, I am slowly dying.

People cannot live together without some basic agreements. Without them the relationships break down, and everyone suffers. If the accountant embezzles company funds, every employee could lose a job. If a husband belittles his wife's soul, the marriage cannot thrive. Being *agreeable* toward someone else is the literal meaning of *submit*. So . . .

Submit means relationally, “for the good of someone else.” We eventually realize that getting along is better than making life difficult for others. That's the beginning of submission. If I am working cooperatively, for the good of someone else, I am submitting. If I “love my neighbor as myself,” that is better for both of us. That's submission.

If I demand independence from everyone else, I'm not free; I'm alone. If I demand independence from God, I'm not free; I'm dead. Physically, you are dependent on how God has ordered the material realm. Spiritually, you are dependent on how He has ordered the spiritual realm. Since the world began, living for myself has always meant death for me. Living in agreement with God has always meant life for me.

Independence from God is death; submission to God is life (verses 4-8). God had to drag the nation of Israel kicking and screaming into freedom. They pleaded for salvation, but complained about the saving process. Once free, they demanded to go back into slavery.

Instead of more oppression, God gave them a radical set of laws—laws which forbid the kind of oppression they had known in pagan Egypt. The Law told them how to keep God central in their lives and community—the only True God, the Good God, the living God who miraculously brought them out of slavery.

But the people only proved how bad they were at keeping God central in their lives. The law was based on the goodness and truth of the only living God. They ignored God and majored on themselves, turning the law into another form of self-righteous oppression. So the law, good and true as it was, only condemned people who failed on both counts.

When **verse 4** says Christ is the *end* (τελος) of the law, a better translation might be the *fulfillment* of the law. Jesus fulfilled the law by living it fully, without fail. And then He fulfilled it by taking the death sentence everyone else has earned, the only man able to die *for* the rest of us because He is the only man *not guilty* with the rest of us.

Christ is God's way for us to be included in God's goodness and truth. Refusing to submit was how we lost life in the first place. So, **verses 5-7** say, faith means we trust God's goodness, not our own. You can't make God love you. He already does. You don't need to motivate God. You need to trust Him.

Verse 8 says God's goodness and truth is already here. You can have it in your mouth and in your heart. How? Through His words. Get to know what He says. Think in agreement with

Him. Trust Him. It is to your benefit to put God's ideas ahead of your own. If you agree with the Lord about His good news, you will be saved.

What does agreement involve? That's explained in Part 6.6.

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Part 6.6

What does a saved person confess?

(This is part of an explanation of Romans 10.)

Romans 10:9 says, *If you **confess** with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe** in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Confess means literally, “say the same words, mean the same meaning.” To confess is to stop denying Jesus, the Living, eternal Word of God, and to agree with Him.

With your mouth means you verbalize it. If you agree that God is the only Source of goodness and truth, and that Jesus is the embodiment of God who died in your place to reconcile you to the eternal goodness and truth of God—you don’t then refuse to tell the truth.

Jesus’ name means literally, “God is salvation.” There is no salvation apart from the God of salvation. To be saved is to be brought back to the Source of all goodness and truth, to be reconciled to God.

Jesus is Lord. “Lord” carries a double meaning.

First, “Lord” means one who gives order and is, therefore, worthy of your submission. Members of the body submit to the head, because in submission to the head the members live and do not die. Societies submit to authorities in order to pursue peaceful lives rather than chaos and oppression. Teams submit to a leader in order that they might function in coordination to fulfill their common purpose. To confess who is lord is to agree who is leading.

Second, “Lord” was the Hebrews’ term for God. God is the ultimate Lord, who gives life and order to all things, and to whom we must submit in order to live and not die. In rejection of God we have disintegration and death, but in submission to God we have life and freedom.

So, to confess Jesus as Lord is to agree that He is God, that your life and freedom is in submission to His ordering of everything, and that what He says is true and good. If you agree with the Lord about His gospel, you will be saved.

So who and what do we trust? That’s answered in Part 6.7.

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Part 6.7

Who and what does a saved person trust?

(This is part of an explanation of Romans 10.)

Romans 10:9 says you can be saved through believing in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Believe means to take someone's word as reliable. It includes both specific content (knowledge) and a relationship (trust). In other words, to believe is to agree with *someone* about *something*.

Heart means the inner commitment that motivates you. In the Biblical languages, your heart is distinguished from your mind, which means your understanding, and your gut, which means your emotions. The mind informs, but the heart motivates what you do.

To "believe in your heart" is to know something about someone that drives the way you live. Verse 9 says that those who agree and trust that Jesus is the risen Lord are saved. That knowledge drives the way they live.

The Resurrection is vital knowledge to have about Jesus. From the start, people knew that the risen Jesus changed everything. Before Jesus rose, they were no different from the rest of dying humanity. What changed them all was meeting the risen Jesus for themselves. That knowledge brought them together and made relevant everything else Jesus said. After meeting the risen Lord, they started agreeing with Him.

Verse 10 says with the heart one believes *into* being justified. ("Into" is the most literal translation.) Agreement with the truth of Christ is how God makes us right with Himself. And with the mouth one agrees *into* salvation. When we speak in agreement with what Jesus has spoken the truth sets us free from our slavery to falsehood. It saves us into goodness and truth.

Verse 11 says those who agree with God "will have nothing held against them."

I have had conversations that go something like this: The other person says, I think we may have a problem. I have this concern. (I say, so do I.) And I think this is what is happening. (So do I.) So I think we should take this approach. (So do I.) So we're in agreement? (Yes, I think we are.) No problem, then! That's what verse 11 is saying about God's conversation with us. If we agree with God about the problem and the true solution to the problem, it's no longer a problem. If you agree with the Lord about His gospel, you will be saved.

But we have one more important term. How can we "call on His name"? That's Part 6.8.

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Part 6.8

How does this trust relationship begin?

(This is part of an explanation of Romans 10.)

Romans 10:13 says, *“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Name, in the Biblical languages, means the character of someone. The Lord’s character is eternal goodness and truth. He is the Source of all life. He is the Savior of the dying.

Call upon means you go to Him for life.

Whom do you call Lord? To whom do you pray? To whom do you submit? Who gives structure and motivation and direction to your life? The Creator of all, who came in the flesh to die for you and rose to make all the difference in the world? Or something else? What determines the order, motivation and direction of your life? What Lord do you call upon to answer your deepest questions? *“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

You can’t separate salvation from the relationship with the Life-Giver (verses 14-15). As these verses put it, how will you call on someone whose words you don’t really care about? And how can you care about them if you haven’t listened to them? How are you going to listen if nobody speaks them to you? How is somebody going to speak to you God’s words if God does not send His people to speak His words?

God’s Word is spoken to dying people in a dying world. In Isaiah 52 He says, *“The feet are beautiful of those sent with good news that is really beneficial.”* It’s beautiful when you are dying for good news, and God sends a message that is eternally beneficial, and someone actually agrees with the Lord by delivering the eternal Truth that speaks life instead of the same old death.

Where can you find people like that, people who actually agree with Jesus and are willing to help you think meaningfully about the words God has spoken to us, and what a difference He makes? God says the “feet” of people like that are beautiful, which means their willingness to deliver the good news to you is a beautiful thing.

I am forever grateful for people who have spoken God’s good truth into my life—people who help me understand what God’s words really mean. I hope you get to know people like that. Where can you find someone who is willing to do the counter-cultural work of understanding God’s words instead of selling you the same misinformed zeal you hear everywhere else? Who helps you think through the struggle to agree with God when the world all around you denies Him? With whom can you talk openly about what you don’t understand, and the ways in which you find it hard to trust the Lord? Those are vital questions.

Do you disagree? By yourself, can you understand what is foreign to 21st-century people? Or do you not need to hear God's words at all? Do you consider them irrelevant to your everyday life? Can you get an eternal perspective from people who deny God's words, from people who leave God out of the conversation?

I have to ask, because Romans 10 says that those who actually speak the good news of God to you are beautiful, very beneficial. God sends them so you will hear His words, so you will listen, so you can agree, so you will care, so you will be saved from the deceptions of the fallen world of which you are a part.

I have to ask, because, **verse 16** says, many people have *not agreed* with the gospel. They may be zealous, but they don't repent, submit, confess, believe or call on the Lord.

And verse 17 says, **faith comes from hearing Christ through His word.**

So (to go back to Part 6.2) does the boy get the girl? Does the hero win the gratitude of the people? Is the child reconciled to the parent? Is Jesus your Savior? That's what the gospel is about.

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Part 7

What do you say?

In Revelation 3, Jesus says, “Look, I am standing at the door, and I am knocking. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”

We need to understand this in the culture of the 1st-century followers of Jesus. Many people did not own the land they farmed. The lord of the estate allowed them to live on the land and farm it. In exchange they returned to him an agreed-upon portion of the crops. He provided the land, the house, the seed, and sometimes the plants he had already cultivated. He provided what people needed to make a living, a life!

Imagine a lord like that knocking on your door, offering to share a meal with you, to treat you as a member of the family. A lord who would do that would be an amazingly generous lord.

Over and over again, the Bible uses this language. God is describing kind of relationship he desires to have with you.

So here he is knocking. “Look,” he says, “I am standing at the door, and I am knocking. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”

Will you answer? What do you say?