

CORE CHRISTIANITY 101

S T U D E N T ' S

E D I T I O N

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INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS STUDY

TO BEGIN, we would like to thank you, the students, congregants, church leaders, elders, pastors, and churches for supporting and using *Core Christianity 101*. We hope it enriches your Christian life, challenges your heart, and builds up your faith to the glory of God.

This study was designed with several things in mind.

First, we designed this study to advance the gospel.

According to the Pew Research Center, theists, agnostics, Jews, and Mormons score higher in religious knowledge than Protestants, outperforming them on questions about the core teachings and history of Christianity. Almost 60 percent of our youth leave their churches as young adults, with many of them joining the growing numbers of the so-called “nones”: those who profess no adherence to any faith whatsoever.¹

Despite this unsettling news, the core message of Christianity, the gospel, is still capable of renewing the church. Rather than worrying or acting out of fear and self-preservation, we believe that the best hope for Christians, the Church, and the people who feel the pressures to abandon the faith, is the historic Christian faith, the gospel announcement of what God has done through Jesus Christ for the world.

Second, we designed this study to speak to honest questions.

Many in our Evangelical, Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican Churches have honest questions about faith and life that they may even be afraid to ask. Thus, we have sought to shape the material in this study to be of use to the concerns of long-time, committed Christians, new Christians, Christians with wavering faith, and skeptics alike.

We want this study to challenge skeptics and the growing numbers of people leaving the church with answers of substance and beauty, answers that give hope to the hopeless. We want this study to build the faith of Christians who have doubts. We want this study to give

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey/>

new Christians a firm grasp of the Christian faith. And we want to renew the faith of long-time committed Christians and equip them to better share the faith with others.

Third, we designed this study with an eye toward simplicity and a variety of settings.

We have thought of Sunday school classes, Bible study groups, informal gatherings among friends, and even individuals who want to learn more about the Christian faith. Thus, this study is arranged in a series of short lessons, each of which could be done within an hour a week, with questions for personal reflection and group discussion so that Christians can come together to share insights, ask questions, pray for their churches and cities, and find hope to share what they are learning with friends and family.

The best way to do this study is to plan to meet once a week, having read the lesson and answered the questions on your own first. There are two types of questions. Questions for reflection are personal and not something you should feel obligated to share with everyone. Questions for discussion are best discussed in a group where everyone can share their thoughts and questions. After each question, space has been provided for you to answer, but some people prefer to write their answers in a journal or notebook, and that is fine too!

Fourth, we designed this study to engage the drama of Scripture, teach the doctrine of historic Christianity, move to doxology, and enable healthy discipleship.

It was really important to us that we handled doctrine in a way that shows how it naturally arises out of the Bible's narrative of Jesus Christ and his saving work. It was also really important that we showed how this doctrine both inspires our worship and leads to life.

In each lesson, there is a section to read followed by a set of questions for reflection and questions for discussion. We have designed the questions for reflection and discussion with a practical emphasis to force you to engage the material in a prayerful way that should inspire worship and lead to a fuller understanding of how to live as a disciple of Christ. The questions for reflection have personal emphasis, while the discussion questions are oriented toward groups.

For Christians who want to get a good foundation in the basics, this study is a complete, self-contained study on the Christian faith. For Christians who want to go deeper, each lesson compliments a chapter of Michael Horton's book *Core Christianity: Finding yourself in God's Story*.

Before you begin the first lesson, watch this video where Michael Horton gives an overview of what you can expect in this study: <https://vimeo.com/167180988/c5d5c1bd96>

LESSON 1: JESUS IS GOD

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167182439/2c6373d021>

READ

The most basic claim of the Christian faith rests on the person of Jesus, and the truth of the Bible depends on the truth that Jesus is God. If Jesus isn't God, the Bible is nothing more than a mixture of history, philosophy, fables, and advice. If Christianity is not true, then Scripture is neither useful nor helpful. If Jesus is God, then the Bible's message is of the utmost importance for every human being.

The British apologist C. S. Lewis made this very case in his book *Mere Christianity*. He referred to a famous argument called the "trilemma." If Jesus did not come in the flesh, live a sinless life, die on the cross, and rise from the dead, he was either a *liar* (since he promised he would rise from the dead; Luke 9:22) or a *lunatic* (since only a crazy man would claim to be the Son of God who came down from heaven). Yet, if he was who he said he was and did what the apostles said he did, then Jesus is *Lord*.

If Jesus is who he said he is—God, who became man for our salvation—it changes everything. It will change the way you think about God, your life, and the world around you. Let's examine the facts about Jesus' life and ministry.

First, the Bible reveals that Jesus and the early church thought he was God.

According to Jesus' own claims, the testimony of the Bible, and other first-century documents, Jesus was called God. This is an important point because if Jesus did not claim to be God, he would not have been arrested and tortured by the Jewish leaders. The fact that he was charged with blasphemy proves that he couldn't have been just a guru or prophet. Rather, Jesus called himself God and was called God (John 8:58; John 14:9; Isa. 9:6; Matt. 16:16; Phil. 2:9b–11; Col. 1:15, 19).

Not only did Jesus exist from the beginning of time, but he also performed numerous miraculous works that only God could do. Jesus' miracles included healing the blind, lame, and deaf; calming the seas; feeding thousands with only a small amount of bread and fish; casting out demons; and resurrecting the dead (for some examples, see Matt. 9:2–8; Mark 8:1–9; Luke 8:22–25; John 11:38–44; 20:30).

The magi, disciples, and early Christians—most of whom were Jewish—all worshiped Jesus as God (Matt. 2:11; Matt. 14:33; Matt. 28:19; John 20:28). The fact that the early church so quickly began to worship Jesus is significant. While the Gentiles worshiped a pantheon of deities, the Jews worshiped the one true God. The early church was committed to the Jewish belief that there was only one God, YHWH, the God of Israel, and they were to worship YHWH alone. When Jesus claimed to be equal with God, this required the church to reconsider everything they knew about God and to embrace a new idea. Since Jesus claimed to be equal with the Father, he was either God come to rescue his people or he was a blasphemer. He could not possibly be simply a good teacher.

Second, Jesus died, was buried, and was resurrected.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are historical accounts about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; these texts are tied to datable events. While we know very little about Jesus' childhood, Roman rulers like Caesar Augustus, Pilate, Felix, and the Jewish king Agrippa appear in the gospel records. Even Quirinius, governor of Syria, is included in the Christmas story (Luke 2:1–2). Because of this, no reputable scholar today disputes that Jesus lived. Even liberal New Testament scholars such as John A. T. Robinson and Bart Ehrman do not question the life, crucifixion, and death of Jesus.

Consider these facts:

- The Jews alive at the time of Christ's crucifixion were convinced Jesus died—so much so that they wanted the Romans to guard Jesus' body (Matt. 27:62–66).
- The Talmud (Jewish rabbinic teachings) also recorded the execution of Jesus (b Sanh. 43a.–b.).
- The renowned historian Josephus (AD 37–100) did not dispute the fact of the empty tomb.

The facts point to a real Jesus who lived and died, and according to all four Gospel accounts, Jesus rose from the dead on the third day after his burial as the promise of our resurrection and eternal life (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18).

All four Gospels mention that the high-standing Jewish leaders Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus assisted in Jesus' burial in Joseph's tomb while the apostles were hiding from the authorities (Matt. 27:57–60; Mark 15:42–46; Luke 23:50–56; and John 19:38–42). It's highly unlikely that the Gospel authors would include such unflattering remarks about the disciples if their accounts were fabricated.

While various theories have been put forth to explain away the empty tomb, no one has ever been able to bring forth any evidence of sightings of Jesus alive or dead to disprove his resurrection.

When we take into account Jesus' claims of divinity, his deeds, his resurrection, and how people worshiped him, we can come to only one conclusion: along with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, Jesus is God. As God, he is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Fully God and fully man, Jesus experienced everything we experience in this sin-cursed world, yet he was without sin. He then took our place on the cross and bore the punishment for our sin. Conquering death, Jesus now offers new life to all who believe in him. Christians are those who place their faith and trust in who Jesus is and all that he has done for them (Rom. 1:16; Eph. 2:1–9). This is the good news—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For more on this subject, read pages 23–37 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some ways you are trying honor Jesus as Lord in your life?

2. What are some ways you can or do worship Jesus?

3. What stands out to you about the way Jesus interacted with people in the Gospels?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Imagine meeting a Muslim man in a coffee shop, and after a friendly conversation, he confesses that he is confused about Jesus and wants to know what Christians believe. What would you want to say? How might you continue to pray for this man?

2. To some Christians it's surprising to discover that there is good historical evidence for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Were you surprised?

3. Of everything you learned in this study, what would you be most excited to tell a friend?

LESSON 2 : GOD IS THREE PERSONS

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167184118/ddea37c465>

READ

The Bible tells us that God is one. The Bible also tells us that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The math just doesn't seem to add up correctly. When it comes to describing God, however, we don't mean one and three in the *same way*.

How can God be one in essence *and* three in persons? Though some religions believe and worship many gods (polytheism), or everything as one with God (pantheism), Christianity, Islam, and Judaism believe that there is only one God. The belief and worship of one God is called *monotheism*. God is one essence.

When we refer to God's essence, we are addressing the concept of his *being*. Here it's important to understand that God is one, that he is not made up of parts and material like human beings. God is Spirit and God is one. We learn this in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Bible teaches God is one.

The Old Testament teaches that there is one God. From the early stages of its existence as a nation, Israel was taught that there is only one God. Israel's fundamental confession in Deuteronomy 6:4 states, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This statement in the Old Testament reflects monotheism. The prophet Isaiah affirmed this same monotheism when he said, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god'" (Isa. 44:6).

The New Testament teaches that there is one God. The New Testament writers continued the monotheism of the Old Testament. We find many statements in the New Testament that assume or affirm Israel's monotheistic creed, including Paul's words in Ephesians 4:4–6: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs

to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

The doctrine of the Trinity evolved from the drama of redemption over time. All the first Christians were Jews who were faced with the fact that God had become flesh in history. After Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christians were able to return to the Jewish scriptures (Old Testament) and understand certain passages better in light of these extraordinary events.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons acting in the story of redemption. In Scripture, we find many places in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are revealed as three distinct persons acting in history. For example, the Bible teaches that Jesus *prays* to his Father (John 17), the Father *speaks* from heaven (Matt. 3:17), and the Holy Spirit *reveals* Jesus as the Son (Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:10). These three actors participate on the same stage throughout the Gospel narratives. The scene of Jesus’ baptism especially reveals this truth.

Before Jesus’ ministry, his cousin John the Baptist had been preaching that the kingdom of God was about to arrive. John the Baptist called for the people to turn from their rebellious lifestyle, turn to God, and submit to water baptism in preparation for that coming kingdom. As Jesus appeared for baptism, John recognized that Jesus was the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. The Gospel writers recorded for us a scene in which all three persons of the Trinity were acting. Jesus was being baptized, and the Heavens were torn open. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and the Father from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:13–17).

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God, equal in power and glory.

In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–20), Jesus told his disciples to meet him on a mountain. As the disciples ascended the mountain and approached Jesus, they began to worship him. Then Jesus, as their Lord and Savior, told them to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The disciples were to baptize Christ’s followers into *one name*, the name that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit share.

In Ephesians 1:3–14, the Apostle Paul records a wonderful doxology (expression of praise) to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for their shared work in salvation. Paul

declares that the Father has predestined believers "for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5–6), and sealed them "with the promised Holy Spirit" who is the guarantee of their inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14).

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all active in carrying out the mission to save people from sin and death and draw these same people into a loving relationship with the Trinity.

- In his love for humanity, the Father sends the Son to earn eternal life and pay the penalty for human rebellion (John 3:16).
- The Son of God is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:34–35).
- Jesus casts out demons by the power of the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28).
- The Father by the Spirit raises Jesus Christ, the Son of God, from the dead (Rom. 8:11).
- The Son ascends to his kingly rule and sends the Holy Spirit to gather his people to himself (Acts 1:8–9).
- The Father and the Son manifest their divine power and glory as they glorify one another (John 17:1–5).

In the early church, Christians struggled to understand how God might be one and yet revealed as three distinct persons. Before coming to a clear definition of the Trinity, the church often fell into two different errors.

Some people, like the early theologian Origen (AD 184–253), attempted to say that Jesus was a lesser god than the Father. A man named Arius (AD 256–336) took it a step further. He fell into the error known as Arianism, which argued that the Father alone is God, while the Son is only a created being. Today, Jehovah's Witnesses embrace this same error.

Others (such as Sabellius in the third century) taught that God only appears in different forms or modes, like someone wearing different masks. This error is called modalism.

These two errors were so serious that the church officially called these views "heresy." A heretic, therefore, is someone who holds to a position that strikes at the core beliefs of the Christian faith, going against the clear teaching of Scripture and the collective wisdom of the church.

The Nicene Creed is a doctrinal statement that is the result of the first ecumenical (universal) church council in AD 325. It was revised to its final form in AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople. Contrary to the errors of their day, the creed affirms that the Son and the Spirit are of the same essence as the Father, but each are different persons.

For more on this subject, read pages 39–52 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The doctrine of the Trinity puts us face to face with this mystery: that God is incomprehensible. Write down a few of the ways that the mystery of the Trinity might inspire you to worship.

2. Ephesians 4:4–6 says, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Take the time to write down some ways you might pray for the church to manifest unity in Christ. Take this time to pray for your church, your denomination, and the church around the world.

3. Because the Trinity is hard to understand, people sometimes become afraid that they might get it wrong. Instead, it’s better to see that the Trinity should inspire awe and humility, revealing the limits of our understanding and language. Write down one new idea or thought you had, either in this study or inspired by this study.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When Christians pray, they pray to the Father, through the work of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. What are some Bible verses that teach this? How does this give you confidence that God hears even our confused or pain-filled prayers?

2. The Mystery of the Trinity should shape us into a different kind of people. As you reflected on the Trinity this week, what are some of the effects that you hope this would have on your life?

3. The Trinity is immensely practical because it is the theology that drove missions. Imagine encountering with the gospel in all its Trinitarian glory for the first time (maybe this is the first time), how might we help people not just understand the Trinity, but worship the Trinity?

LESSON 3 : GOD IS GREAT AND GOOD

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167184667/c4300a6cd0>

READ

If God is great, why doesn't he prevent natural disasters and terrorism? Some people think the answer is that God must not be good. If God is good, why does he allow for evil to exist in the world? Some people think this means God must not be great. If God were great, he would at least be able to get rid of evil. The fact that evil still exists only seems to prove that God is not great.

The answer God gives in the Bible about the presence of evil in the world may surprise us. It is important to realize that much of who God is and what he does remains a mystery to us as creatures. What he has revealed, however, is enough for us to trust his character and have faith that he will be true to his Word.

The Bible teaches that God is great.

We tend to imagine that God is a greater version of ourselves. Actually, God is in a totally different category. In fact, he is in a class all by himself. God alone is eternal, immortal, all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing (1 Tim. 6:15–16). In fact, his spectacular majesty is beyond our ability to comprehend:

- God is *independent* of all created things (Acts 17:24–25). The technical term is *aseity*. He exists as the Triune God from all eternity in perfect love and fellowship.
- God is pure *spirit*. He is not made up of parts and has no means of corruption as we do (John 4:24). Another way of putting this is to state that God is *simple* and *unified*. He is also perfect and unchangeable (*immutable*).
- God is *omniscient*. Rising above our limited perspective, God knows the end from the beginning because he is eternal (Ps. 139:16).

- God is *omnipresent*. Because he is spirit, God rises above the category of “place” that limits us in our words, speech, actions, and presence (Jer. 23:24).
- God is *omnipotent*. That is, he is all-powerful. Some people think of God’s sovereignty and human freedom as if they were pieces of a pie: God may have a larger piece, but it is the same pie. God is not just *quantitatively* greater than his creatures, but he is also *qualitatively* greater (Matt. 19:26).

These attributes of God are called his *incommunicable attributes* because they belong to God alone.

The Bible reveals that God is also good.

Everything God does is good because God is pure good. While people can be loving, compassionate, and merciful, showing concern for justice and righteousness, these attributes are only analogies of those that God holds in complete perfection. These are also known as God’s *communicable* attributes.

Consider how you relate to your infant or child, or to an elderly parent. Similarly, God condescends to us as our heavenly Father. The following attributes of God testify to his loving care for his creation:

- God is *loving, compassionate, and merciful*. The biblical story shows us a God who is love (1 John 4:8). Though he is high in the heavens above us, majestic in glory, yet he is full of compassion and mercy, that “while we were enemies” Christ died for us (Rom. 5:10)
- God is *just and holy*. Holiness is the moral, transcendent perfection of God. It is the purity of his goodness; there is no evil in him at all. God’s holiness asserts that he alone defines what is good; hence, his judgment is good. While the judgment of sinners in the Bible is often seen as cruel and unfair, God’s goodness is actually seen in his just judgment of sin.
- God is *faithful*. He is faithful to his Word. He is faithful to his justice and holiness. He does not change because he is faithful to himself. Yet, he is also faithful to his promises, sending his Son to fulfill the law and bear our curse. Because of his great love, he found the way through his Son’s sacrifice on the cross to be faithful to his justice and greatness while showing merciful love and saving compassion: “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Let's contrast this with two popular ideas.

First, most polytheistic religions teach that good and evil spirits struggle for control of the universe. The Bible tells us that (1) God is the perfect moral law-giver and that (2) evil is a *corruption* of God's good gifts of creation.

Second, atheists who deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil are not standing on a firm ground of reason. Something is "evil" or "good" only when we compare and contrast it with a perfect, moral law. The sense of a moral law within all human beings points to a "moral law-giver" (Rom. 1:18–23).

Rather than deny the existence of God because of the existence of evil, we must trust the God who is good and great to conquer evil. The Bible doesn't deny evil but instead gives us a story in which God overcomes evil.

The Bible tells the story of the problem of evil in a world that was originally created good by a supremely good and majestic God. Evil is not a timeless principle, but it is actually the corruption of good due to the rebellious actions in history against God's rule. All sins are evil, but not all evils are sin. The world is filled with natural evils, including hurricanes, earthquakes, pestilence, and droughts, that are the results of the common curse from Adam's fall (Gen. 3:17-19).

Consider two verses:

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.
(Psa. 5:4)

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom. 8:20-21)

Evil exists in the world for the time being, but God promises to one day destroy sin, death, and the devil. We know this is true because the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of evil's defeat (1 Cor. 15:20–28). For now, we live with the existence of evil while we wait for God to finally destroy it.

For more on this subject, read pages 53–66 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Often the existence of evil and suffering can be one of the most challenging experiences for Christians. Below are 4 questions. Answer two that most apply to your situation:

How has the existence of evil and suffering in the world and in your own life personally affected you?

How did you think about it while experiencing the pain of suffering?

How was this different after passing through the dark time?

What questions do you still have?

2. Take one of the incommunicable attributes of God. Think of a time in your life where it would really matter that God had that particular attribute. How might you praise God for that aspect of who he is?

3. Take one of the communicable attributes of God. Think of a time in your life where it would really matter that God had that particular attribute. How might you praise God for that aspect of who he is?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What has God promised to do about evil? Why can we trust that God will keep this promise?

2. If a friend from church confessed to you that they had a hard time believing in God because of some evil or suffering in their life, the temptation might be to rebuke them for having weak faith. But how might we be compassionate toward a person with such a confession? What should we do when people admit struggles and doubts?

3. The Bible presents a God who is both great and good. Many Christians who have suffered have drawn courage and hope from the Bible. How might we read the Bible not simply as a book of information but as a way to draw hope in God and courage to do what is right? What are your own habits in Bible reading? What might you change in light of the first question?

LESSON 4 : GOD SPEAKS

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167185583/fb882f06d4>

READ

God still speaks to us today, but it's not in the way that usually makes the news headlines and sells books. From Genesis to Revelation, God proclaims his son Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). We can understand God's speech from three angles.

First, God speaks today through the Bible.

The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by humans across different times and places. These authors were weak and sinful, just as we are, but God used their words, their thoughts, and their individual styles to put into writing what he wanted to tell us in a trustworthy way.

The apostles and prophets have no successors. Rather, ordinary ministers now build on the foundation the apostles and prophets laid, and their ministries are judged by how faithfully they communicate God's Word. New revelation cannot be added to the Bible. The Holy Spirit illumines the hearts and minds of his people to understand, interpret, and obey his written Word.

The Bible was written by diverse authors over two millennia, yet it still has a unity that can be attributed only to a divine author. It reads from promise (Old Testament) to fulfillment (New Testament) and is the greatest story ever told, revealing the greatest Savior to behold. We can have confidence that the Bible is the Word of God because it is *inspired, authoritative, inerrant, clear, and sufficient*.

The Bible is inspired by God. The very words—and the entirety of Scripture—are "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). The apostle Peter states, "For no prophecy was ever produced by

the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21).

The Bible is authoritative. Jesus, who is God incarnate, viewed the Old Testament as authoritative (Matt. 19:4–5). Jesus also viewed the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah as being fulfilled in himself (Luke 4:21). Furthermore, Jesus authorized the apostles to speak in his name (Matt. 18:18 and Matt. 28:16–20).

The Bible is inerrant. If God is behind the writing of the Bible, and God is great and good, then it follows that Scripture is without *error, falsehood, or deceit*: “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps. 119:160).

The Bible is clear in its message. Moses was not an astronomer, and the Bible is not a science textbook. If we go to the Bible looking for answers to questions that are beyond its purpose and scope, we will turn it into an entirely different book, as did the Pharisees to whom Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39–40).

The Bible is sufficient. The scope of the Bible is God’s commands and promises—law and gospel—centering on the unfolding plan in Jesus Christ, the main character and center of the plot: “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled’” (Luke 24:44).

God speaks through the preaching of his Word.

Although God speaks to us through the Bible, he especially speaks to us in the public gathering of his people each Sunday through the *preaching* of his Word. One way to understand preaching is to distinguish between two main activities that a preacher does while preaching: he exposit the text and applies it to our lives.

Exposition seeks to explain the meaning of the Bible with respect to its historical context, the original authors intentions, the nature of the Bible’s literary forms, and the Bible’s broader redemptive purpose. Scripture contains differences in genre (history, poetry, parable, doctrine, etc.). We need to respect those differences and allow the Bible to ask its own questions and provide the answers God wants to give us. This often involves the preacher’s study of history, the ancient world, Greek, and Hebrew while trying to understand the meaning of the author’s ordinary words. Exposition respects the very human and historical nature of the Bible.

In reading the Bible, what becomes apparent is that much of the Bible's larger context is a unified story of salvation. It's a story about God and human beings. In this story, human beings are the disobedient, stubborn, and disoriented. Because of the choices of the first human beings, mankind as a whole is in a mess of guilt and corruption. The Bible presents God's answer to this human plight. God sent Jesus Christ to live, die, and rise for the forgiveness of sin. The broader story becomes very important in Bible application.

Application seeks to show how God speaks to our needs and our situation today. Application shows that God's word in its historical context and with its redemptive intention is relevant for us today. The Bible shows us how God is involved in our lives, that he is with us, that he is offering himself to us in mercy and grace.

If you look at the sermons in the book of Acts, for example, we see the apostles engaging in this kind of exposition and application. In Acts 2, the apostle Peter takes a text from the Old Testament prophet Joel and reveals how that prophecy came true in the person and work of Jesus. Then he states the required response to the good news of what Jesus Christ has done in his sacrificial death and resurrection: they must repent of their sins and trust in Jesus for their salvation. Here is an early example of "Christian" preaching, where Christ is the focus of exposition and application.

God speaks law and gospel.

There are two main parts to the Word of God: law and gospel.

The law includes everything in Scripture that God commands us to do or prohibits us from doing. Paul captures this commanding nature of the law in Romans. He says, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

The law is a word that comes to us from within, and it is written on everyone's heart (Rom. 2:15). It was once written on stone tablets in Israel's history, and in the history of man it is inscribed on the conscience. Everyone gets law, and everyone prescribes law to others. When you ask a friend for some advice, the first words spoken are often words of doing: do this; don't do that. The law brings no hope of relief but only tells us where we've gone wrong and what we need to do in order to make things right (Rom. 3:19–20). The law says, "Do this and live" (Lev. 18:5; Gal. 3:12).

It's not that the law is bad. In fact, the law itself is good because it comes from God and reflects his good character. The apostle Paul even says, the "law is spiritual" (Rom. 7:14). So we know that the problem is not with the law, but the problem is with us. As Paul

concludes, “the law is spiritual,” but “I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Rom. 7:14). We are bad—the law exposes our sin—and that’s why the law becomes bad news for us.

The gospel is the good news, given throughout the Old and New Testaments, regarding what God has done in Christ out of his love in order to reconcile the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). God’s law is good, but we are unable to keep it because of our sinfulness. Thankfully, God sent his Son to do for us what we could not do ourselves. Paul captures this aspect of God’s word in Romans: “[Now] the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom. 3:21–22).

The gospel is a word that comes to us from outside of us, and it has been revealed by God in his Christ. This word must be spoken, and it is the good news of what God has done in Christ to reconcile us to himself—to satisfy all of the demands of the law and to make atonement for all sins committed. What the law required, Jesus Christ has accomplished. What the law demanded, Jesus has satisfied. The gospel says, “Believe this, and it is done already.” Jesus’ final words on the cross are appropriate to summarize the good news of the gospel: “It is finished!” (John 19:30).

Whenever you read a verse, you can immediately tell whether it is law or gospel by either the demands it makes upon you or the promise it offers you. The law commands you to do something or to stop doing something. The gospel, however, tells you what God has done for you or what he will do for you.

What separates the teaching of Christianity from every other world religion is that the Bible reveals to us how the law can never save us; only Jesus can. No other religion tells us that God has done what we could not do for ourselves. No other religion offers us the gospel: the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:25).

For more on this subject, read pages 67–79 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Find one passage in this study about the Bible's authority. What are some ways in your church and in your own devotional life that the Bible is honored as the Word of God?

2. What is Bible exposition? Why is Bible application important?

3. Through the Bible, God speaks a powerful message of grace. What are some key passages about the gospel that you know? What do these teach you about God?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Bible is inerrant and inspired, but our interpretations are not. Yet, whenever we read the Bible, we must interpret it. How should this bring humility to our reading the bible?

2. Sometimes people pit reading the Bible “devotionally” against “study.” How are you currently reading the Bible and how might that change after having done this study?

3. Even though we are not saved by the law, we must still seek to glorify God in keeping the law. How does knowing that you’re saved by grace inspire you still to do good works? What are some good works that are easy to overlook either because they are too ordinary or because they are challenging?

LESSON 5: GOD MADE THE WORLD BUT WE'VE MADE A MESS OF IT

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167288595/4c92ea5161>

READ

The Bible tells us that God made the world very good (Gen. 1:31). If that's the case, why do people face so many struggles in life? To understand the world as it is today, we need to learn about the biblical account of creation and where we fit into the story.

Scripture tells us the following about God's work in creation:

- God is the author of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).
- Next, we learn that God *spoke* all the material of creation into existence from *nothing*: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3).
- God's spoken *commands* also shape creaturely response: "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:24).

This speech points to the specific *relationship* between God and creation. God is the Lord, and creation is his servant. Only two categories exist: God and everything else; creator and creation. God made humans alone in his own image and gave them a special role in creation:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

God made humans his royal representatives.

To be human is to hold a high office, maintaining God's good order of love, righteousness, holiness, and justice. Everyone is intrinsically aware of this divine calling: all people have God's moral law etched on their conscience (Rom. 1:20).

God placed his image bearer Adam "in the garden of Eden to work and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). He then gave Adam a command to test his covenantal faithfulness: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16–17).

As God's royal representatives, Adam and Eve were supposed to exercise their authority and drive God's enemies from his garden. Instead, the serpent (Satan) twisted and corrupted God's Word. Satan enticed Adam and Eve to rebel against God by telling them that they would not die but would instead "be like God, knowing good and evil" if they ate the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:5). Even while Satan was falsely promising Adam and Eve autonomy if they obeyed him rather than God, he knew autonomy was impossible: Adam and Eve would serve someone. Satan wanted humans to bear his image, not God's.

Adam and Eve committed treason against their King.

When Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise," she took the fruit and ate it and gave some to Adam, who ate it as well (Gen. 3:6). Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, but not in the way they expected. They were naked, ashamed, and unable to cover their sin and guilt with man-made coverings of fig leaves (Gen. 3:7).

God found Adam and Eve in the garden and demanded an account of their treason (Gen. 3:8–10). God then exercised his righteous judgment by the following sanctions:

- He cursed the serpent (Gen. 3:14–15).
- He multiplied Eve's pain in childbirth and cursed her seek control over her husband who would rule over her (Gen. 3:16).
- He cursed the ground upon which Adam would labor with great toil (Gen. 3:17–19).

Adam, God's covenant servant, defied his own high office and committed treason against his King. Sin and misery entered the world because of Adam's rebellion, breaking the relationship between God and creation. God made clothes from animal skins and clothed Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:20). He then cast Adam and Eve from the garden and barred them

from the tree of life. Adam *and his posterity* were now in bondage to sin and estranged from God (Isa. 59:2; John 8:34).

For more on this subject, read pages 81–97 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When you think about being made in the image of God, how does that make you feel? It’s especially true that victims of violent crimes could lose a sense of value as human beings. What might you want to tell someone who has lost a sense of human dignity?

2. Genesis 3 records the story of the fall when Adam and Eve sinned against God. When you think about sin and misery in the world, what comes to mind? What would you pray for people who are experiencing that kind of sin and misery?

3. Psalm 19 is a beautifully written poem about creation displaying the glory of God. Write down a couple of the praises in this psalm that stand out to you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What comes to mind when you read these words: “To be human is to hold a high office, maintaining God’s good order of love, righteousness, holiness, and justice. Everyone is intrinsically aware of this divine calling: all people have God’s moral law etched on their conscience” (Rom. 1:20)? What are some things we can do to begin to look at people as “made in the image of God” on a day-to-day basis?

2. In Matthew 22:34–40, Jesus taught that the entire law of God can be summarized as loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. And in Matthew 23:23 Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” What are some of the weightier matters of the law in our situation that challenge us?

3. Genesis 1 reveals God as the author of creation. A God who is powerful enough to create the world out of nothing is definitely powerful enough to work in our lives and to save anyone who would come to him. When you think about God’s power to save, how does that give you hope for the people you know who don’t yet know Jesus as their savior?

LESSON 6: GOD MADE A PROMISE

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167289818/3e200fa5e6>

READ

The stories of the Old Testament contain much more than mere moral lessons. In fact, these stories reveal a bigger story, a more expansive plot. While we can and must learn from the good examples we find in the Bible, we need to see that what unites these stories isn't morality but *redemption*.

From Adam to Abraham to David, all of these Old Testament characters and stories have a place in the larger drama of God the Father sending his Son Jesus so that all may have life in his name through the power of the Spirit. As Jesus told us, the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to him (Luke 24:25–27; John 5:39). Thus, Scripture needs to be seen through the lens of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of a very specific promise.

The story of the Bible is the unfolding of God's promise that—though we deserve death for our sin—God will bring us into glory through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of his Son Jesus. In fact, Abraham, Moses, David, and Daniel all take their place as joyful beneficiaries of the promised gift of eternal life. So God is the ultimate hero in the greatest story ever told.

The key context of this promise is covenant. Remember: a covenant is an oath or promise that forms a relationship between two or more parties (Lesson 5). Even though there are several different covenants throughout the Bible, each of these covenants is united by one central truth. Let's look at the different covenants God made and kept with Abraham, Moses, and David.

God's Covenant with Abraham

The Abrahamic covenant terms are *unconditional* and *permanent*. Usually in the covenant-making process, one party was greater than the other party. We see a clear example of this in Genesis 15. In that story, God completes a covenant-making ceremony by

passing between the pieces of severed animals. This was often the way treaties were ratified in Biblical times. This act signified that the party passing through was assuming the same fate as the animals should he fail to keep the terms of the treaty. Normally, the lesser party would walk through—in this case, Abram (God changes Abram's name to Abraham in Genesis 17). In an unusual yet beautiful twist, God, the greater party, walks through the pieces. *God is willing to die should he not uphold his unconditional and permanent covenant!*

God's Covenant with Moses

The Sinai (or Mosaic) covenant terms were *conditional* and *temporary*. On Mount Sinai, God gives the law to Moses, the mediator of God's covenant with the nation of Israel. Israel receives detailed commands governing every aspect of its life. Here, along with the bloody sacrifices, the tabernacle and priesthood testify to the demand of righteousness by a holy God, the seriousness of sin, and the need for a mediator greater than Moses to reconcile us to God. Time and time again, God demonstrates his faithfulness and love in spite of the people's faithlessness and disobedience. Israel cannot keep up its side of the covenant no matter how hard it tries. Though Moses' lieutenant Joshua is able to bring Israel into the promised land of Canaan, Israel continues to disobey God's commands. Even though Israel fails to keep its commitments, God keeps all his promises to Israel in the conditional and temporary Sinai covenant (Josh. 23:14).

God's Covenant with David

In the Davidic covenant, God promises that a descendant of David will rule on the throne forever. Even through the period of the judges, Israel remains unfaithful, forsaking the true God for other gods. So the last judge, Samuel, is told by God to anoint a king over Israel. Their first king, Saul, looks promising, but he cannot attain to the level of obedience demanded by God. The Lord then chooses David as the King of Israel. David's desire to replace the impermanent tabernacle with the permanent temple serves as the occasion for God to make an unbreakable covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:4–17). Though sinful, David receives a promise that his house/dynasty will be an everlasting throne, held by his son.

Although David's son Solomon is credited with much wisdom, he could not escape the foolishness of sin either. Solomon fails to be the promised forever-king. As each generation passes, we read of kings who come and go and, for the most part, lead their people away from God. Eventually, the sin of God's people becomes so great that judgment must be dispensed. Israel and Judah are conquered by foreign nations and taken into exile.

God keeps his promise to David by sending his own Son to be the king who will be righteous for the people. Hope remains not in the temporary and conditional covenant made in Sinai, but on the basis of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. A new covenant is promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34. Here God reminds his people that in spite of their infidelity, he will bring forth a greater prophet, priest, and king: one who will fulfill all the promises and commands of the Old Testament and establish his throne forever. He will lead his people on a greater exodus and allow them entrance into the greater promised land. *God will redeem his people—but this will come with a cost.* Through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and vindicating resurrection, Jesus will conquer death itself for his people and grant access into God’s presence forever.

For more on this subject, read pages 99–116 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. “The story of the Bible is the unfolding of God’s promise that—though we deserve death for our sin—God will bring us into glory through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of his Son Jesus.” Does this sentence reflect the way you understand the Bible and history? How might this statement of theology give hope to a Christian who is going through challenge after challenge with no end in sight, feeling like life is mostly meaningless?

2. The history of Israel can be summarized by this one sentence: “Time and time again, God demonstrates his faithfulness and love in spite of the people’s faithlessness and disobedience.” How is this true in your life?

3. As a descendant of David, Jesus is the promised king who will rule the world in righteousness. Read Psalm 2. What strikes you about the Son's rule?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between a conditional and unconditional promise?

2. The history of Israel can be summarized by this one sentence: "Time and time again, God demonstrates his faithfulness and love, in spite of the people's faithlessness and disobedience." How is this true in the Christian life? How does this give us confidence that God is able to gather people who stray from his grace?

3. Psalm 2:10 says, "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth." When you think of this as both a promise of God and an expression of hope upon the lips of God's people, what comes to mind? How might this comfort a people who feel oppressed by sin from within and evil from the outside? What do you think is the good news of Jesus as King?

LESSON 7: JOY TO THE WORLD!

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/167290759/80a068408a>

READ

The best news in the world makes everyone want to burst into song. The coming of Jesus is the turning point in God's story. God does indeed send a redeemer for Israel, but this savior isn't going to return God's people to a nation or state made up of a physical land under theocratic rule. Jesus comes to 1) earn eternal life for his people by keeping God's law perfectly, which Adam, Israel, and all humanity failed to do, and 2) offer himself up as the perfect sacrifice for their sins.

The Bible is chiefly a story of redemption.

The big plot of Scripture is the war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Throughout the Old Testament, the devil is hard at work attempting to thwart God's plan to save people from their fallen state. From the days of Noah to the testing of Abraham, from the persecution of the Hebrews by Pharaoh and the struggles of the Israelites in the wilderness to the temptations to which David succumbs, Satan seeks to destroy God's people by preventing the coming of the Messiah.

In Luke's account of Jesus' birth, an angel appears to a Jewish virgin named Mary "in the days of Herod, king of Judea," with the most wonderful news: she shall bear a son named Jesus, who "will be called the Son of the Most High," of whose kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:5–33). Even after Jesus is born, Satan doesn't stop trying to eliminate the promised seed. When Herod hears from the wise men of a king's birth, he orders all the children under the age of two years old to be murdered to remove any possible competition to his crown; however, God protects Jesus from harm and he grows in wisdom and stature (Matt. 2:13–15; Luke 2:52).

Jesus is the true and faithful Son.

In his genealogy of Jesus, Luke refers to Adam as “the son of God” (Luke 3:38). Yet, Adam failed to obey God. In Exodus 4:22–23, God refers to Israel as his “firstborn son,” yet Israel also failed to keep God’s law. Ever since sin entered the world through Adam, God was waiting for a true and faithful human son who would keep his law out of duty and joyful thanksgiving, fulfilling the purpose of humanity’s creation.

To be God’s true and faithful son, Jesus needed to fulfill specific requirements and prophecies:

- The greater Adam: Jesus must be the fully human descendant of Adam in order to prevail in the trial where Adam failed and win the right to eat from the tree of life (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 4:15; 9:22; 10:4).
- The promised Seed: Jesus must be the true offspring of Abraham by Sarah in order to be the child of promise, through whom the world would be blessed, not the child of human effort, which is represented by Hagar (Gal. 4:21–34).
- The eternal King: Jesus must be the true shoot of Jesse and the descendant of David who would keep God’s law perfectly in order to rule on the everlasting throne (2 Sam. 7:12–13; Isa. 11:1; 1 Kings 9:4–9; 11:4–8).

The four Gospels describe Christ’s work to redeem humanity from sin, judgment, and death. Since no mere human being could keep God’s law perfectly because of Adam’s fall, only Jesus, being both fully God and fully man, could be the perfect Son of Israel.

Where the nation of Israel failed to keep God’s law, Jesus succeeded in every way. The covenant mediated by Moses was conditional and was never meant to last. The old (Mosaic) covenant ended when Jesus lived the perfect life and offered up the perfect sacrifice for all those who trust in him. The greater unconditional promises of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in the new covenant of grace through Jesus Christ. At last, God had a true and faithful Son who willingly obeyed his Father and submitted to his will in all things.

God declares unrighteous people to be righteous in Christ.

What does Christ’s fulfillment of the Law and his perfect sacrifice mean for us? The *doctrine of justification* explains how sinful humans are declared righteous before a holy God through the finished redemptive work of Christ: “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18).

It is not enough to just be acquitted of guilt—we must also be righteous before God to merit eternal life. When we place our trust in Christ alone, not only is our curse imputed (counted) to Christ, but his righteousness is also imputed (counted) to us. The apostle Paul sums up these amazing gifts of God’s grace in his letter to the Corinthians: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther called this transfer of our debts for Christ’s riches “the marvelous exchange.” God doesn’t *make* a person righteous upon conversion; rather, he declares the believer justified by a legal verdict in Christ alone, through faith alone, by grace alone, on the basis of God’s promise (Rom. 5:1).

It is futile to try to win God’s approval through our own inadequate works, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Jesus triumphed over sin and death with his perfectly obedient life, substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, and vindicating resurrection from the dead (Heb. 4:15). Salvation comes only by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Jesus alone.

For more on this subject, read pages 117–130 in Michael Horton’s *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Because Jesus kept the law on our behalf we can keep the law, not to earn salvation, but because we are free to love God having received salvation as a gift (Eph. 2:8). And in Ephesians 4:1-3 Paul says, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

What does Jesus’ faithful life teach us about what it looks like to obey Paul’s command?

2. What ideas come to mind when you think about Jesus' birth? What are some biblical ideas that seem to be out of step with pop culture understandings of Jesus' birth?

3. In Romans 5:6-8 Paul says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Read this verse over a few times. What thanksgiving could you pray to God as a response?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When Jesus was born, he was subject to the same suffering and pains we are. He was born into poverty and into a world of conflict between Satan and the world on one side and God and his people on the other. How might this give us confidence that God understands our situations and cares about all the details?

2. How does Jesus' life model obedience to God? What is similar about our call to obey God and Jesus' call to obey God? What is different about our call to obey God compared to Jesus' call to obey God?

3. Imagine a Christian friend who feels that they are not sure they have done enough good works to gain salvation. How might we speak to a person about the grace of the gospel?

LESSON 8: JESUS IS LORD

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/170202722/2afb21c398>

READ

Heaven and eternal life can seem very far away at times. Some people look to Jesus mainly to help them with their problems here on earth. Jesus does care about the difficulties we face in this life, but he came to the world to do much more than make our daily lives more fulfilling.

Jesus is Lord over death.

The day after Jesus rose from the dead, two of his disciples were walking along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13). They didn't recognize Jesus at first because they had certain expectations about who the Messiah was and what he had come to do. What actually happened was very different from what they expected. These disciples needed someone to teach them the Bible to understand why Jesus was crucified, since they thought he was supposed to free the Jews from Roman rule.

Jesus explained the Scriptures to these confused disciples: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:25–27).

Later, Jesus joined them for dinner, and their eyes were opened when he took the bread, broke it, and gave it to them. Jesus wanted his disciples to first recognize him as the fulfillment of the Old Testament story *before* they recognized him by sight.

We are in the same position today as these disciples were on the road to Emmaus. People often look for a sign or vision to learn about God, but what they need to know *is the story in which Jesus is the central character*. We cannot shoehorn Jesus into whatever we want him to be. He has cast us as characters in *his* story, and what a joyful story it is!

As the Lord who commands and the Servant who obeys, Jesus humbled himself to be born in the flesh to conquer sin, death, Satan, and hell as one of us. He reigns both as fully God and fully man, being the faithful and victorious last Adam. Jesus rules by serving and serves by ruling.

If the church is the official embassy of a king who declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18), why does his kingdom seem so weak and fragile?

Christ is building his kingdom on earth, but his methods and means differ from those of the world. We can be confident that Christ has the authority to rule because of his vindicating resurrection from the dead and his promise to overcome the world. While our relationship to death has drastically changed because we are united to Christ in his resurrection, the sting of death is not completely removed from us presently. But as Christians we can have hope even in the midst of grief (1 Thess. 4:13).

Jesus is building his church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is building his kingdom through the building of his church, which is his people (Matt. 16:18). If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, then you should join a local church. Jesus does not save his sheep from the wolves only to leave them to fend for themselves (John 10:10–16). Christians need to be clothed, bathed, and fed with Christ’s saving gifts. They also need to be taught, guarded, and guided by his ministers and elders.

While there are many aspects of church life that help people grow in their faith, the Holy Spirit primarily works through the ordinary means of the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and godly discipline to build up the body of Christ (John 14:26; Eph. 1:17–18).

There are several ways in which Jesus as Lord presently disciplines us in ordinary ministry:

- Jesus serves us by the Word. The regular preaching of the Word is vital to our discipleship. The Bible tells us that faith comes by hearing the gospel (Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23–25).
- Jesus serves us by baptism. Being baptized and remembering our baptism is vital to our discipleship. Baptism lies at the heart of our Lord’s Great Commission as it is the entrance into the church, the public assembly of his saints (Matt. 28:19).

- Jesus serves us by the Lord's Supper. Regularly taking the Lord's Supper is vital to our discipleship. The Lord's Supper is a feast that is meant to nourish us spiritually and assure us of our sharing in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16).

A *disciple* is one who also learns and comes under instruction and guidance. Christ disciplines his sheep in the three ways:

- Discipleship involves learning through sound teaching and through wise, godly examples (2 Tim. 3:10; 4:2).
- Discipleship involves being shaped by the prayers of the church, both spoken and sung, and by the common confessions of sins and of faith in Christ.
- Discipleship sometimes involves needing to be corrected in doctrine or life. Jesus calls us his sheep because, like sheep, we are prone to wander (Ps. 119:176; Matt. 18:12–13).

Christ has given his church servants. Christ has given his church the *special offices* of pastor, elder, and deacon to guide, protect, and care for his sheep. To grow and thrive, Christians need to be properly disciplined by the leadership of the local church. While most believers do not hold a special office in the church, we all hold a *general office* as royal priests, loving and serving one another in the name of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:9). All believers are priests because we each have access to God's presence through Christ (Eph. 2:18). We also offer spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving to God through Christ (Heb. 13:15).

For now, the church is where and how Jesus' saving lordship is seen and heard. Even though our churches may appear to be small and insignificant in the eyes of the world, they are the consulates of Christ's embassy of grace. Jesus is Lord!

For more on this subject, read pages 131–143 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. As the Lord who commands and the Servant who obeys, Jesus humbled himself to be born in the flesh to conquer sin, death, Satan, and hell as one of us. He reigns both as fully God and fully man, being the faithful and victorious last Adam. How does Jesus' victory over death inspire your worship and prayer life?

2. Jesus is building his kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is using the ordinary means of preaching and teaching, baptism, the Lord's supper, and the discipline of the church to do it. What is one area of your church's ministry for which you are especially thankful?

3. How are you being discipled at your church? What are some ways you can become more active in being a disciple?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As the Lord who commands and the Servant who obeys, Jesus humbled himself to be born in the flesh to conquer sin, death, Satan, and hell as one of us. He reigns both as fully God and fully man, being the faithful and victorious last Adam. How does Jesus' victory over death inspire your worship and prayer life? How might this inspire us to share burdens with people and help them?

2. The Bible teaches that Jesus is building his kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit, but sometimes it's hard for people to see this. The church doesn't often look glorious. People suffer. Scandals happen. How should we see the kingdom expanding despite the challenges we experience?

3. Often the phrase "Church discipline" tends to scare people because it can sound like the church wants to punish sinners. But when we think about it more carefully, church discipline isn't just calling people to repentance or excommunicating people who don't repent. Church discipline includes all the work pastors and church leaders undertake to form us in Christ. What are some good sides of how pastors and church leaders do the work of discipleship through discipline?

LESSON 9 : WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/170203690/92e0edc6dc>

READ

If Jesus is King, why is it that the world is still filled with suffering and death?

We need to understand that death is the last enemy, and its defeat is certain (1 Cor. 15:26). People often try to smooth over the grim reality of death by turning funerals into celebrations with no place for mourning. Death, however, is not natural; it is a horrible thing that has entered our world because of sin (Rom. 5:12). Yet, Christ's work for believers has radically transformed their experience of death.

Christian hope is generated by the gospel. Rather than trusting in our own personal views or wishes about what will happen after we die, we can trust God's Word to know the truth. Death is cause for real sorrow; yet even as we mourn we have hope because Christ bore the curse of sin for us on the cross. God foretold Jesus' coming in the Old Testament, and Christ's resurrection is the vindicating proof that God will fulfill all his promises throughout the entire Bible (Acts 17:31). The resurrection of Jesus is the hope upon which the Christian faith stands (1 Cor. 15:14).

The Bible tells us that the sufferings of this present time—physical illness, pain, sorrow, death—are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). Paul suffered from many afflictions in his life, including illness, beatings, and a stoning so severe that he was nearly blinded. Still, Paul rejoiced in spite of these adversities: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Death is not the final chapter of the story.

Christians can accept the reality of death because they know it is not the final chapter of the story. Immediately after death, we enter into the presence of God waiting for the resurrection of our bodies at the last day (2 Cor. 5:8). This is the *intermediate state*.

Our future in the presence of God is far better than our situation now, but it is far less than the resurrection. During the intermediate state, our bodies decay in the earth, not yet being raised in glory. In Revelation 6:9–10 we have a picture of the departed saints who are fully aware of the persecutions and struggles of those who have not yet entered the intermediate state. These departed saints cry out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (v. 10).

The intermediate state is temporary as we wait for Christ to return and bring us into a new creation that will be just as physical and terrestrial as the current creation but without sin, sorrow, pain, or death.

What will happen when Christ returns?

When Christ returns and ushers in (consummates) the new creation, he will raise the dead, judge the nations, and lead all believers into the everlasting glory of the age to come: all the dead will be raised, and Christ will judge righteously by his perfect standard (Matt. 12:36–37; 2 Tim. 4:1).

Apart from Christ, the entire world stands guilty and awaiting punishment before God (Rom. 3:9–20).

- Salvation in the Bible is salvation from God’s wrath (Rom. 5:9).
- There are important differences between Christians and non-Christians at the final judgment.
- While non-Christians are judged according to their own works, Christians are judged according to the finished work of Christ done on their behalf (Rom. 4:23–25).
- Christians receive the reward because they are heirs with Christ (Gal. 4:1–4).

God will recognize many ordinary acts of love and kindness that Christians didn’t even realize were good works, whereas the non-Christian’s best works will be judged as filthy rags (Matt. 25:31–46; Isa. 64:6).

The final judgment turns out to be a final vindication for Christians as their faith is proved to be fruitful (Luke 9:23–26; 1 John 5:4).

At Christ's return, he will lead creation into everlasting glory in the new age (Rev. 21:1–4). Scripture uses many pictures to give us an idea of what the new heaven and new earth will be like. What we know is that—having been resurrected—we will experience physical existence. It's often pictured as a feast (Isa. 25:6–9; 55:1–3; Matt. 22:2–14; Rev. 19:6–10). Scripture teaches that the new creation will contain worship (Rev. 19:10) and that God's glory will be its light (Rev. 21:23). We know that the new heaven and new earth will be free from sin, sorrow, death, and pain (Rev. 21:4).

The most significant thing about heaven on earth is that God himself will dwell with us, and we will behold him face-to-face (Rev. 21:1–3; 1 Cor. 13:12). While Scripture has only given us hints about the new creation, we know enough to understand that it will be greater than anything we have ever experienced. Thus, as God's people, we wait and hope for Christ's return. Come, Lord Jesus!

For more on this subject, read pages 145–156 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13. How would you pray for someone who is grieving over the death of a Christian family member?

2. What is the difference between the intermediate state and the resurrection?

3. The most significant thing about heaven on earth is that God himself will dwell with us, and we will behold him face-to-face (Rev. 21:1–3; 1 Cor. 13:12). Look up these two verses. Write down what most stands out to you.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Because Jesus is Lord over death, we can be confident that through faith in Jesus, even though we die, we will enter into the presence of God and be raised on the last day. In light of this truth, how can we better comfort Christians who are grieving over the death of a Christian family member? What might we say? How can we pray? What could we do to help?

2. The Bible tells us that the sufferings of this present time—physical illness, pain, sorrow, death—are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). How does this motivate you to keep living for the glory of God and for the good of your neighbor?

3. The final judgment turns out to be a final vindication for Christians as their faith is proved to be “not in vain” (Luke 9:23–26; 1 John 5:4). At Christ’s return, he will lead creation into everlasting glory in the new age (Rev. 21:1–4). Why should this give us confidence that God will gladly receive us into his glorious kingdom?

LESSON 10: IN THE MEANTIME — CALLINGS

WATCH

<https://vimeo.com/171488027/b93e355d96>

READ

When it comes to knowing the times and seasons of God’s unfolding plan, we need to know where we are and where we are headed. Christ’s kingdom is already here, but it is not yet fully arrived in all its glory.

In Scripture we discover that we are located at a precarious intersection between this present evil age and the age to come. Christ came the first time in humility and self-sacrifice to bring salvation. At his second coming, Christ will come in power and glory as the judge of the world (Matt. 24:30; 25:31–36).

Waiting for Christ’s Return

People have offered three answers to this question:

- Christians should be *triumphalistic*: This view teaches that Christians should transform the world for Christ and make the world a better place, suitably fit for Christ's return.
- Christians should be *defeatists*: This world is doomed, so we must save as many souls as possible from this “late, great planet earth.”
- Christians should be *witnesses*: We are called to be witnesses of Christ, to suffer for that witness, and to love and serve our neighbors in our worldly callings.

The third view—being a witness for Christ—best recognizes the tension between the “already and not yet” of Christ’s kingdom here on earth while we wait for Jesus' return. Christ has toppled the dominion of sin, and even now we can see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, though at times it seems indiscernible.

Living in an Economy of Grace

Since Christ has already come and brought us peace with God, our lives take on an attitude of thanksgiving. We no longer offer sacrifices for guilt. We live as those who belong to Christ, moved into a kingdom of grace and not of debt. We are free at last to be thankful, offering ourselves as “living sacrifices” of praise to God (Rom. 12:1).

We must not shrink from our responsibilities in daily living, and we also must be clear about our calling as Christians in this present world. We need to keep two things in their proper order:

- First, God first serves us with his saving grace (Acts 17:25–26; Rom. 11:35–36; James 1:17).
- Second, receiving God’s saving grace, we do good works out of the love God forms in us by the Holy Spirit. And God uses these good works to serve our neighbors in daily life (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:22–24; 6:2; Col. 3:17; Eph. 2:8–10).

Remembering the following will help Christians keep a proper focus on how to live in this world:

- Christians are not building a kingdom; they are *receiving* one (Heb. 12:28–29; Rom. 12:1–8). The church is this new body in Christ where each person does his or her job to nourish and strengthen other members by the Spirit’s gracious gifts (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:12–27).
- Christians are called to love and serve their neighbors to the best of their abilities. Believers do good works for the glory of God and the good of others (1 Cor. 10:31).
- Whether it is in the church, the family, or in a secular vocation, God has given each of us various callings. A Christian can be—and often is—a parent, spouse, employee/employer, deacon, child, and volunteer, all at the same time! We sometimes think that our gifts don’t matter much, but they are essential (Rom. 12:1–8).

Sometimes new Christians wrongly assume that life will be better now that they have trusted in Christ as their Savior. Life can actually become more complicated for Christians because there is a war going on inside of us between our desires to obey God’s will and our indwelling sin, even though we have been justified by God because of Christ’s righteousness that is counted to us.

Living with Common Grace

Christians share in the common curse and common grace of this world just like unbelievers. We enjoy the benefits of human progress from medicine, technology, and other good inventions. We also still get sick and die. Yet, death no longer has the final word for believers. God uses it to free us from our decaying bodies so we can be raised in glory (1 Cor. 15:43).

God's will for our lives doesn't have to be a mystery. Everything God says that we need to know is contained in Scripture. Beyond that, God's secrets are just that—*secret* (Deut. 29:29; 1 Thess. 4:1–12). We are free to be who God made us to be, where we are, with the gifts he has given us, without worrying about finding out his secret will. God has revealed his saving will and love for us and has made us to be a conduit of his love in our service to others. We need to wisely interpret Scripture regarding the good and necessary principles for life that God gives us in his Word.

God gives us gifts not only for fellow believers but also for those who do not yet know Christ. God makes us his ambassadors, witnessing by word and deed to Christ's victory over sin and death, all the while conforming us to the image of his Son.

For more on this subject, read pages 157–168 in Michael Horton's *Core Christianity*.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. We are called to be witnesses of Christ, to suffer for that witness, and to love and serve our neighbors in our worldly callings. This can be a frightening call, but God has given us the Holy Spirit. Beyond church on Sundays, how else are you a witness in your situation? Consider the small, everyday interactions.

2. The problem with triumphalism is not its goal; Christians should want to see their good works produce change in their lives and in their societies. The problem with triumphalism is that it expects us to transform the world so that Christ's kingdom will come, as if Christ's coming is dependent upon our work. How are you freed to serve in love when you recognize that Christians receive the kingdom by grace?

3. Because of common grace, even non-Christians contribute to the well-being of society. What are some of the "general goods" in the world that you are thankful for?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Christians should be *witnesses*. We are called to be witnesses of Christ, to suffer for that witness, and to love and serve our neighbors in our worldly callings. What are some practical ways we can share the gospel with people? How does our love and service help or hinder our witness?

2. The good news about your calling is that through the ordinary simple stuff like going to work or school, serving our families or friends, and speaking Christ's words of hope, God serves the world. God serves the world through us. How does this reveal that your life has meaning?

3. In this world, we participate in common goods with Christians and non-Christians. This is not to say either that Christians are doing everything right or that non-Christians never oppose God. It's to say that God, through common grace, uses Christian and non-Christian together to accomplish his care and preservation of society. How does this idea free us to work for the common good with a spirit of gentleness in secular spaces ? Why is it a good thing to work with non-Christians to do good in the world?
