

The Sword



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The Sword

(The Bible Explained)

“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” Ephesians 6:17

Chapter 1

A Vision

How’s life for you? Is it good? Maybe your life is full of problems. How would it be if you could live in a perfect world? What would a perfect world be like?

I have a nephew who just graduated from college. He’s a handsome young man in the peak of health. He’s a popular guy with lots of friends. He has a wonderful girlfriend, and he just got his dream job. Obviously, for such a young man, life is good.

Sadly, we all know that life isn’t like that for everyone. Many young men and women around the world are not so lucky. They find themselves impoverished, unable to go to college or even high school, unable to find a job that pays enough to supply even the bare necessities of life.

Wouldn’t it be great if everyone had a good education, got a good job, had great health and had many friends? In a perfect world, everyone would have all these things.

I have a niece who recently sent me a gift of compostable paper plates and plasticware. She’s concerned about plastic bags spoiling the environment. She’s concerned about the environment in general, pollution and global warming. In a perfect world, there wouldn’t be any pollution or global warming. There wouldn’t be a single plastic bag in the ocean or on the beach. Every home and every vehicle would run on clean energy.

One of the problems with the present world is people. People argue. People fight. People hurt one another. There is domestic abuse, theft and murder. People can’t get along with each other. Nations can’t get along with each other. Wars are going on somewhere all the time. In a perfect world, all people of every size, shape and color would get along with each other and love each other.

My father was a successful management consultant. He created a niche for himself going all around the world telling the CEOs of major corporations how to run their businesses. He rubbed shoulders with the movers and shakers of the world. The world was his oyster. Life was good for him. But my dad got old.

I helped take care of him for a few months during the last year of his life. He was no longer rubbing shoulders with the high and mighty. His wife (my mom) had passed away after 65 years of marriage. His friends were dead. He was feeble. He was alone (except for me at that time). He kept asking me, “Why am I still here?” It was sad seeing a man, who in the past had been so capable, in such a condition. In a perfect world, people wouldn’t get old and feeble. They wouldn’t become disabled. In a perfect world, they would go on living in perfect health forever, along with their friends and loved ones.

However, think about this. If we were able to live on and on in perfect health with our loved ones and friends, in a world free of pollution where everyone got along with each other in peace and harmony, we might still have a problem: boredom! We all know how it is with our favorite food. No matter how much we love that food, if we keep on eating it every single day, we’ll get tired of it. We’ll get

to the point where we just can't stand it. Of course, none of us has ever experienced a perfect world, so we need to use our imaginations, but I imagine we would eventually get bored with everything being so perfect. We would get tired of it and wish that we could die. We might get tired of our activities, tired of our friends, tired of our loved ones. Everything would be so "been there, done that" that we just wouldn't be able stand even the perfection of it anymore.

On the other hand, just imagine that there was a unique and infinite person in our perfect world. Imagine that this person was infinite in every way: infinitely powerful, all knowing, all wise, even infinitely interesting. Each person in this perfect world would have a personal relationship with this infinite person. We could grow unendingly in our knowledge and understanding of this infinite person and in our relationship with Him. Thus, we would never stop growing as people. Because of the presence of this infinite person and our relationship with Him, we would never get bored. Life would always be interesting, exciting and challenging forever.

Wow, that would really be a perfect world, wouldn't it? Too bad we're not in that world. Instead, we're stuck here in this one. Too bad that perfect world is purely imaginary. But wait a minute. What if it's not imaginary? What if what I've been describing is a real world to which you and I can gain access? What if the key to begin experiencing that world now and fully experience it in the future is explained in a particular book?

Such a book does exist. It promises everything I've described. Through this book, millions of people have already begun to get a taste of that perfect world. These millions of people are also convinced that the full-blown experience of that perfect world will soon be theirs. Could all these people be right?

The book I'm speaking of is the Bible. Does the Bible promise everything I've stated above? Yes, it does. Can the Bible deliver on these promises? I've experienced that it can and will, but don't take my word for it. Why not investigate this important question for yourself? If such an investigation interests you, continue reading the rest of this booklet.

The Bible's Main Points

Introduction: I first began to be fascinated with the Bible in 1963. Over the past 56 years, hardly a day has passed that I have not spent time reading and studying the Bible. I can honestly say that throughout all that time right up to the present day, I have constantly found it to be thrilling and fascinating.

The Bible is made up of 66 books. Many of these books are very short. They're more like booklets than the books of today's world. But there's a long tradition of calling them books, so I'll still call them that here. The 66 books are divided into two groups. The first 39 are called the Old Testament and the last 27 are called the New Testament. As you might expect, the Old Testament is older. All its books were written over 400 years before any of the New Testament books.

God: In all 66 books, the Bible's central theme is God. The Bible presents the idea that there is one true God who created all that exists and who is holy (which means that He has an extremely high standard of perfection regarding right and wrong, which He never violates in any way). He is infinite in all positive attributes. He has all strength, is all wise and all loving and has an intense interest in humanity. The first book of the Bible (the book of Genesis, chapters 1-3) tells us that this God began human history by creating two people, Adam and Eve. God's purpose in creating them was that they should live in a close friendship with Him and worship Him. Worship is any act, word or thought that draws attention to the worth and greatness of God. In the beginning, these two people had a close friendship with God. God gave them one command by which they could demonstrate their loyalty; love and worship.

The Fall: A fourth individual, a snake (controlled by an evil spiritual being, Satan), entered the picture. The snake spoke to Eve and enticed her, and she disobeyed God's one command. Then she enticed her husband, and he also disobeyed God's command. Because of their disobedience, God placed certain consequences upon Adam, Eve and all their future descendants. Work would become hard and unpleasant; childbirth would become much more painful; male and female relationships would become strained. Ultimately, all the troubles and suffering present in the world today (war, crime, pollution, climate change, every kind of dysfunction) would come as a result.



Adam and Eve's disobedience is referred to throughout the Bible as sin (which means people doing things displeasing to God). The Bible tells us that the tendency to sin was passed on to all Adam and Eve's descendants and has been a dominant characteristic of humanity ever since.

One pervasive kind of sin is the common tendency of people to ignore God and to go their own independent way. The present situation could be described as all people having an "anti-God" bias, not with reference to all gods or to the general idea of there being some kind of god, just having an anti-God bias toward the one whom the Bible presents as "the one true God."

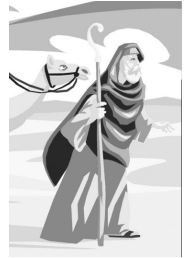
Despite people's anti-God bias, the Bible explains that this one true God is very loving and patient toward them. But He will eventually judge and punish sin appropriately. The punishment for sin will be severe. It will be death, both physical and spiritual.

The Flood: The Bible relates that over time people became increasingly violent and wicked, to the point that it was necessary for God to send a flood and



destroy all human life. However, He arranged for one family who obeyed Him (Noah, his three sons and their wives) to be saved on a large boat along with two of every kind of animal. Then the world became repopulated through that one family. It is an interesting fact that ancient records from many different civilizations around the world make mention of a flood that killed everyone except one family that was saved on a boat.¹

Abraham: At a certain point in history (about 2000 BC, still in the first book of the Bible, Genesis), God chose a man named Abraham to be his agent on earth. Abraham would be the ancestor of a nation called Israel (named after one of his grandsons). A unifying theme of the Old Testament is God's promise to Abraham to give his descendants the land of Palestine and to bring blessing to the whole world through them, especially through one of his key descendants.



Moses: According to the Bible, in the plan of God, the people of Israel lived in Egypt for a long time. Then, under the leadership of a man named Moses (1450 BC), God led them out of Egypt, gave them extensive instructions called "the Law" (contained in the first five books of the Bible), which includes the famous Ten Commandments, and led them into the area of Palestine. God used them to occupy that land and to bring his judgment upon the evil people living there.



Israel: The purpose of Israel being a special nation for God was that people all over the world would learn about the one, true God through them. God's plan for Israel was a long-term plan. It included times in which they did well, but also many times of failure and disobedience leading to punishment.

The people of Israel lived in the land of Palestine for several hundred years. David, their greatest king, lived in about 1000 BC. In about 900 BC, the nation was divided into two parts. The larger part kept the name Israel, and the smaller part was called Judah. Because of their sins, the inhabitants of that larger part were carried away from Palestine as captives by the nation of Assyria in around 700 BC and resettled in another place. Over the following centuries, many of them gradually migrated back to join the remaining kingdom, Judah.



Jews: Only the smaller kingdom, Judah, was left in the land of Palestine. A shortening of that name occurred, and these people began to be called Jews (this name originally meant "those who come out of Judah"). Throughout the rest of the Bible and continuing into modern times, all the descendants of Israel, regardless of which of the two kingdoms they came from, are usually referred to as Jews. Eventually, just like Israel, Judah was also carried away as captives, but to another place, Babylon (600 BC). Later, many of those from Judah returned to their land (500 BC).

Prophets: The Old Testament claims to have been written by special men that God chose, called prophets. The first prophet was Moses (1450 BC) and the last was Malachi (400 BC). Each prophet claimed to convey messages from God to the Jewish people, and through them to the whole world. Their messages included instructions, corrections and warnings.

Some of the books of the Old Testament consist of general thoughts about God and prayers (like Psalms) or general thoughts about wise and godly living (like Proverbs). Other books give the history of the Jewish people and their interactions with the nations around them. Some of the books give details of the lives of the men and women who were good examples and played key roles in the important events in Jewish history (such as Ruth, Nehemiah, Daniel and Esther). One book (Job) is about a non-Jewish man who suffered a great deal, who had a close friendship with God and whose life was an example for others. Many of the books contain fascinating and exciting stories of men and women who were faithful to God and performed exploits like escaping a fiery furnace, surviving in a den of hungry lions, killing a huge giant and being given super-human strength. There are also

1. If you google "List of Flood Myths" you will find a catalogue of over 40 such stories from ancient cultures in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America, Malaysia, the Philippines and Polynesia.

messages about a future time when God will punish both the Jewish people and the rest of the world for their sins, and also about a time after that when He will bring great blessings upon both groups.

The Messiah: An important theme, which the Old Testament writers often touched upon, was the promise of a glorious future that God would bring about one day, in which the nation of Israel would be the most prominent nation on earth. This would happen because a special king would come and lead them. He would be a descendant of David, the man who had been Israel's greatest king. The title of Messiah would be given to this person. "Messiah" simply means "the king that God would choose." The Jews up until the time of the New Testament looked forward to the coming of this great Messiah. When the Messiah came, they believed that He would rule as king over the whole world. He would bring justice to all nations and lead the entire world to faithfully worship and serve the one, true God. He would cause the world to be nearly perfect.

Scattered through the Old Testament books are striking and cryptic statements about the great coming Messiah. He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5). He would have a miraculous virgin birth (Isaiah 7). He would be called "the mighty God" (Isaiah 9). He would have a forerunner who would be like the prophet Elijah (Malachi 4). One passage (Daniel 9) specifies the time in history when He would be "cut off," which many see as a reference to His death, in about AD 30.

Promises: The Old Testament contains many promises that were to be fulfilled in the future. One of the most important of those promises was given to Adam and Eve by God at the time that they first sinned (Genesis 3). God said there would be a human born one day who would destroy Satan, but in so doing this person would also suffer. Another promise was given to Abraham, that one of his descendants would bring great blessing to the whole world (Genesis 22). Another promise was given to Moses. Moses, the greatest prophet in the Old Testament, was promised that God would send another prophet just like him (and possibly even greater) one day (Deuteronomy 18). Isaiah 53 contains the promise of someone who would one day die as a sacrifice for the sins of all people and then come back to life.

People in Old Testament times struggled to make sense of many of these promises. It was difficult for them to tell whether they all referred to the same person, the Messiah, or to several different individuals. It was hard for them to see how they all fit together.

The New Testament: The last part of the Bible is called the New Testament. The focus of the New Testament is a man called Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had 12 main followers, who were at first called "disciples" and later on, when they were conveying His teachings to the world, were called "apostles." The New Testament consists of 27 books written by people that Jesus authorized to convey His teachings to the world: three of His disciples (Matthew, John and Peter), Mark (a close associate of Peter), two of Jesus' half-brothers (James and Jude), a special man named Paul (whom Jesus chose to write about half of the New Testament books) and Paul's close associate, Luke. The first four books of the New Testament (called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) tell about activities and events in the life of Jesus. The next book, Acts, tells about the activities of Jesus' followers, especially Peter and Paul, after He left to go to Heaven. The rest of the books are letters that Jesus' followers wrote to various gatherings of people who believed in Him and to certain individuals, to give them instructions. The last book, Revelation, is also a letter to gatherings of believers, but is distinctive in that it includes predictions about the end of the world.

The Main Point: The central point of the New Testament books is the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament (John 20:31). The New Testament calls Him "Jesus Christ." Christ is the Greek word for Messiah, because the New Testament was written in Greek.

The New Testament claims that Jesus fulfilled many of the Old Testament's predictions about coming individuals. It claims that He's the one who would crush Satan, as was promised to Adam. It claims that He's the descendant of Abraham who would bring blessings to the whole world. It claims that He's the promised Prophet who would be like Moses, only greater. It claims that He's the person

spoken of by Isaiah who would die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It claims that the sacrifice of His life was symbolically foretold in the Old Testament practices of Passover and animal sacrifice. It claims that He had a miraculous virgin birth which fulfilled prophecy. It claims that He was born in Bethlehem, also fulfilling prophecy. It claims that He performed a very large number of unique miracles, signaling the presence of the Messianic kingdom. It records that He had a forerunner (John the Baptist) who was like Elijah and that He died at the time specified by Daniel, both fulfilling prophecy. Most importantly, it claims that Jesus came back to life from the dead, fulfilling prophecy.



The Jewish religious leaders were looking for a Messiah who would be a normal human being and would become the ruler of the world. The New Testament records that Jesus confounded these Jewish leaders by asking them this question: “If the Messiah is David’s descendant, why does David call Him Lord?” He was citing an Old Testament passage showing that the Messiah had to be more than an ordinary man and suggesting that He would, in fact, be God. The Jewish leaders couldn’t answer Him, but they were appalled and incensed by Jesus implying that He was God.

Jesus’ Death: The Jewish leaders felt threatened by Jesus’ claims, His miracles and His popularity. They plotted against Him for several years and finally manipulated the Roman governor into executing Him by crucifixion. (Crucifixion was the Roman form of capital punishment. The Roman Empire ruled that part of the world in those days. Crucifixion was the most agonizing kind of execution imaginable).



The rulers’ plot was no surprise to Jesus. The New Testament records Him predicting numerous times that He would be crucified, and that this had to happen, because it was part of God’s plan to save us. According to the New Testament, because Jesus never sinned, there was no need for Him to be punished for His own sins. Through His death, He was able to take upon Himself the punishment for the sins of everyone else in the world, so that we don’t have to be punished as we deserve. Instead, we can be forgiven. Jesus explained that all we must do to receive this benefit is trust in Him.

Jesus’ Resurrection: The first four books of the New Testament report Jesus predicting repeatedly that He would come back to life on the third day after His crucifixion. He publicly stated that His resurrection from the dead would be the definitive proof that He was the Messiah. This created a strong combination events providing evidence for His resurrection. His disciples were understandably scared to death, surprised and discouraged when He was arrested and put to death. The Jewish leaders wanted to make sure that no one stole His body and used the empty tomb to claim that He had come back from the dead. They arranged for a squad of Roman soldiers to guard His tomb. But on the third day the tomb was empty anyway, because Jesus had come back to life from the dead. The stone was rolled away, an angel appeared and the guards ran away. The New Testament records that Jesus appeared to His disciples off and on for 40 days. Then He ascended, disappeared into the clouds and returned to Heaven. His disciples waited 10 more days in Jerusalem as instructed by Jesus before He left. The New Testament records that the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of God Himself) then came upon them. Suddenly, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in them, they had great courage and power to tell people about Jesus’ resurrection and the fact that He truly was the Messiah.



Reasons for Trusting in Jesus: The disciples spent the rest of their lives spreading the message about Jesus all around the Roman world. They were faithful to this task at great personal cost, even the loss of their lives. That’s how Christian churches (gatherings of believers in Jesus that met in homes at that time) were started all over the Roman Empire. All this is what the New Testament rec-

ords.

It is hard to understand how Jesus' disciples, who were very ordinary men, could have accomplished all that they did if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, appear to them and send them the Holy Spirit. The New Testament demonstrates the high integrity of both Jesus and His disciples. All these facts taken together – fulfilled prophecy, Jesus' character and reportedly sinless life, the character and lifelong testimony of his disciples and the apostle Paul – all these combined in a seamless way to powerfully convince people, both then and now, that Jesus did truly rise from the dead, verifying His identity as the Messiah and as all the Bible claims Him to be.

The New Testament's Message

What Jesus' Followers Proclaimed: One of the New Testament books, Acts, details the experiences of some of Jesus' followers after He left earth. As they went around telling people about Him, they announced that, if people trusted in Him, they would be right with God, would be forgiven of sin, and one day when Jesus returns, would be raised from the dead and enjoy His wonderful kingdom forever—a perfect life in a perfect world. They believed that because all people sin, all people are under the judgment of God and face eternal punishment for their sins. The good news is that people could trust in Jesus as the Messiah who took the punishment for their sins in their place, and then be instantly and forever forgiven of their sins, free from the judgment of God and able to enter His wonderful kingdom. What the disciples proclaimed can be summarized in one verse (Acts 16:31), **“Trust in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”**

This meant that a person was made totally right with God from the very moment he or she truly trusted in Jesus as the New Testament describes Him. People were to trust that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah (king) who will one day rule the world, that His death on the cross took the punishment for everyone's sins, that He came back to life on the third day, that He was both God and man at the same time and that He would return to be the final judge of all people. All that people needed to do was put their personal trust in Jesus as their Savior (the one who saves them from the penalty of their sins) and be willing to obey Him as their Lord. Such faith was a gift from God and not a result of their own good works. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 states: **“by grace you have been saved through faith. This does not come from yourselves, it's a gift from God. It's not a result of works, so no one can boast.”**

Jesus' Instructions: The disciples also taught people everywhere they went to obey all of Jesus' teachings. This is what Jesus told them to do in Mathew 28:18-20: **“Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.”**

All that Jesus commanded can be summarized under three categories:

1. Love for Believers: His most important command was that people who trust in Him should love each other. This command is repeated numerous times in the New Testament. One important place is John 13:34-35: **“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** Since that was His most important instruction, His followers formed believer gatherings (churches) all over the Roman world. In order to love one another, believers had to know each other and had to meet together frequently. The believer gatherings became like a second family. Just as most people care for and are willing to sacrifice for their biological family, believers in Jesus were taught to care for and sacrifice for their fellow believers in their gathering and for other believers who lived further away as well. They were still supposed to love God, of course, and continue caring for their biological families. They were supposed to show love to nonbelievers (neighbors) also, but to take love to an even higher level with fellow believers. Peter wrote **“Since you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth through the Holy Spirit so that you have a sincere love for other believers, see to it that you keep on loving each other with all your heart”** (1 Peter 1:22). The believer gatherings throughout the Roman world of that time became known for how much the believers loved one another.

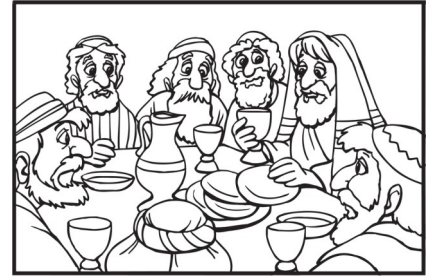


2. Repentance: Repentance from sin was a consistent part of the message presented to people both by Jesus and His followers. Repentance means turning away from whatever practices or even thoughts are not pleasing to God. This idea was so ingrained into Jesus' followers that Paul wrote **“If any man names the name of Christ, let him depart from iniquity”** (2 Timothy 2:19), meaning that no one should even claim to be a follower of Christ (that is, Jesus) if he's not doing all he can to stop

sinning.

The struggle against sin is to be lifelong; the Bible makes it clear that only when Jesus raises believers from the dead will victory over sin be fully achieved. In this struggle, believers were taught to cultivate an attitude of dependence on God for His help. Believers are expected to continue in this lifelong struggle and, with God's help, expect substantial victory.

3. Following All Bible Teachings: Jesus also taught “**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God**” (Matthew 4:4). By this He meant that His followers should pattern their lives after the teachings of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. He indicated that some of His followers would write authoritative messages from God, just as the Old Testament prophets had done. This would include many instructions not mentioned in categories #1 and #2 above, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper (the Lord's Supper is a ceremony in which believers in Jesus each eat bread and drink wine or grape juice to remember that Jesus died for their sins), worship, prayer, charitable giving, communicating the teachings of Jesus to new people, obeying governmental authority and forgiving those who wrong them.



Doing the commands in all three of these categories are acts of true worship (drawing attention to the worth and greatness of God) for which mankind was originally created.

By the end of their lives, Jesus' original followers had succeeded in establishing believer gatherings all over the Roman Empire that were characterized by the observance of the commands in these three categories.

To Jews First: First, Jesus' disciples concentrated on presenting His message to Jewish people. Jesus and His original twelve disciples were all Jewish. Many Jews at that time began to trust that Jesus was the Messiah. But most of the Jews did not believe and began persecuting those who did. This caused many of the believers to be scattered around the Roman Empire. These scattered Jewish believers started telling Gentiles about Jesus, and large numbers of them began trusting in Jesus. (A Gentile is anyone who is not a Jew.)

The Traditional Jewish Position: Jews back then and today who reject the claims of Jesus but believe the Old Testament say that there is one true God, that Jesus of Nazareth is not the Messiah because He didn't rule the world and that He was, in fact, someone who showed disrespect for God by illegitimately claiming to be divine. They are still expecting a merely human Messiah to come and fulfill the promises of ruling the world and instilling godliness everywhere.

The Traditional Christian Position: Most people who trust in Jesus today understand that the one, true God of the Old Testament exists in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These three are always in perfect harmony with each other as the one true God, yet are three distinct persons. They point out that this “trinity” of God is suggested in many ways in the Old Testament (such as the plural name “Elohim” for God, the many appearances of God in human form and the references to the Spirit of God). God's triunity, they would affirm, was necessarily only revealed clearly in the New Testament, because the Son, Jesus, entered the world as both God and man at the same time to become the Messiah. He had to be seen as distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit. They also suggest that the Old Testament predictions were like looking at mountains in the distance. Two mountains might at first appear to be the same distance away but could, in fact, be at different distances. When a person reaches the first mountain, they realize that the other one is still a long way off. The many Messianic promises of the Old Testament seemed as if they would all occur at the same time. However, when the first promises of the Messiah were fulfilled, it became clear that others were still a long way in the future. But the ones that were fulfilled, they believe, were so remarkable and convincing that no unbiased person could fail to recognize Jesus of Nazareth as the Messi-

ah. The New Testament also predicts that one day, when Jesus returns, all Jews living at that time will become believers in Him.

Legalism: A common misunderstanding that the New Testament was careful to guard against was the idea that trusting in Jesus was only the first step towards being right with God and being able to go to Heaven. Afterward, according to the misunderstanding, believers had to continue following the many regulations found in the Law that had been given to Moses, including the painful operation of circumcision for men. Only after fulfilling all these regulations could a person claim to be right with God. This way of thinking is called “legalism.”

People in general tend to gravitate towards this kind of thinking, a “salvation by works” (even if their own list of requirements differs from the list of requirements in the Law that had been given to Moses).

Believers in an area called Galatia were leaning in this direction. Paul wrote them a scathing denunciation of this kind of thinking, saying that they had left the true message of Jesus and were following a false message.

The Obedience of Faith: Trusting in Jesus and obeying Him do go together. In one place Jesus said, “**Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say?**” (Luke 6:46). Jesus’ disciples would probably have said: “If a person really trusts in everything the Bible claims about Jesus, they will want to do what Jesus says.” James wrote about this. “**What use is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?**” (James 2:14) “**Show me your faith without the works and I will show you my faith by my works.**” (James 2:18) His point is that people can’t show their faith to anyone, even themselves, without works. The only way to show faith in Jesus is by doing what Jesus says, just because Jesus says to do it. Paul wrote that he was trying to bring people from all over the world to “**the obedience that comes from faith**” (Romans 1:5).

To be clear, believers are accepted by God, based not on their own works, but based on the work that Jesus has done, receiving the punishment for their sins when He died on the cross. Demonstrating one’s faith does not entail checking off a huge list of requirements hanging over a believer’s head. (That would be legalism.) Rather, even doing just one act of obedience to Jesus was evidence of faith and of right standing with God. This was intended by God to inspire believers to want to do more and more acts of obedience to Jesus, resulting in ever greater assurance of their faith and of their right standing before God.

Human Failure Because of the Old Nature: Many people would conclude that carrying out all of Jesus’ commands is difficult. They would think that even if they decided to trust in and follow Jesus, they wouldn’t get very far. They would keep messing up. They would be fearful of being hypocrites and of pretending to be more righteous than they really are.

According to the Bible, God also desires honesty and hates hypocrisy. Believers in Jesus still have an old, sinful nature that causes them to sin even after becoming believers. The Apostle Paul was the most exemplary follower of Jesus in the Bible, yet he wrote, “**For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.**” (Romans 7:19) God has made provision for people’s sinful nature and frequent failure. According to the Bible, Jesus’ death paid for everyone’s sins— past, present and future, no matter how terrible those sins might be. The Bible instructed believers to confess their sins to God and repent. When they do so, they are immediately forgiven for those sins and restored in their relationship with God. Even if a person committed the same sin 100 times in one day and repented and confessed it to God 100 times, they would be fully forgiven every time! On the one hand, this was God’s gracious provision for human failure due to the continuing presence of the old nature. On the other hand, this is not an excuse for believers to go on sinning carelessly as if it didn’t make any difference. In that case, they would be acting like unbelievers.

The Obedience, Assurance and Growth of Believers: Normally, in the New Testament, when a

person first trusted in Jesus, they would demonstrate their faith by doing their best to stop whatever sins they might be aware of, get baptized and begin attending believer gatherings to start developing loving relationships with other believers and to participate in the Lord's Supper. It would have been natural for anyone who truly trusted in Jesus to want to do these things anyway. Doing these things both showed other people that the person was now a believer and, through the Holy Spirit's internal affirmation, confirmed to their own mind that they trusted in Jesus and were right with God. When people first trusted in Jesus, they were normally unaware of the fact that God had enabled them to trust in Him. But God's plan in the Bible was that as new believers learned more, they would become aware of their total dependence on God. They would then develop an attitude of prayerful dependence on God in all things. Then their initial demonstrations of faith would grow and develop into ever greater acts of faith and obedience, to the point where the believers were able to continue faithfully and joyfully obeying Jesus despite the most intense persecution and the most severe tragedies that life might bring. In this way, they would be preparing for a future in God's presence in a perfect world.

My Challenge

Review: The Bible—Old and New Testaments taken together as a whole—presents itself as the key that unravels the mystery of life. It's all about God, and it focuses on a great Savior (the one who saves us from our sin penalty). The Bible urges us all to trust in that great Savior, Jesus, and be forgiven of our sins and made right with God. It promises us that through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we will begin to have a taste of the perfect world that God will bring about one day. The Holy Spirit also, at the same time, will begin to fill us with hope for the wonderful new world we will all be a part of when Jesus raises us from the dead just as He, Himself, was raised from the dead. It further directs us to demonstrate our belief in Jesus by obeying His instructions to struggle against sin with God's help and to conform our lives to the teachings of the Bible.

To the Skeptic: I'm hoping that, having read this far, you may now feel much more favorably towards the Bible. Consider for a moment the Bible's most widely quoted verse, John 3:16: **"God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, that whoever trusts in Him will not perish but have everlasting life."** If there is such a God with such a love for you that He would send His eternal Son into the world to die a cruel death just so that your sins could be forgiven and you might receive access to a future perfect world, why not give the Bible a chance to touch your life by reading it and meditating on it? I urge you to ask God to show you the truth about Jesus. We all need God's help to overcome our natural inclination to reject God. Somehow, we need to be made willing to do what Jesus says, if He's to show us that it's all true (John 7:17). Maybe you can now see that the Bible makes sense and is consistent within itself. But you might wonder how its message can possibly stand up against all that the modern world throws against it. If you feel this way, read the sequel to this booklet, "The Shield," in which that issue is addressed.

To the Faithful Believer: Perhaps you already do trust in Jesus and are faithfully trying to do all that Jesus says to do. You're engaged in loving relationships with other believers in a gathering, you've been baptized, you regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper, you strive continually to stop sinning, you strive continually to conform your life to the teachings of the Bible and are engaged in taking ever greater steps of faith and obedience to Jesus. Praise God. I hope that reading this booklet has encouraged you to continue in all these things with even greater enthusiasm.

To the Superficial Believer: Perhaps you feel that you do trust in what the Bible says about Jesus, but you have not been doing the things Jesus says to do. Believers can get off track, just like those in Galatia long ago. In Philippians 2:12, Paul writes: **"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."** We are to build on the foundation that God has laid in Jesus (1 Corinthians 3:10). I hope that reading this booklet has motivated you to get back on track and show that you trust in Jesus by doing what He says to the best of your ability. Only by getting serious about following Jesus will you be able to be sure that you are a believer and are right with God. Otherwise you might prove to be a fake believer and, tragically, end up on the outside of Jesus' glorious kingdom forever.

My Story: I began to trust in Jesus in 1963. It wasn't because of anything good in me. I was just a sinful, self-centered guy. But God touched my heart and enabled me to trust in Jesus as being all that the Bible says He is. The Holy Spirit came into my life just as the Bible said He would. The result was that I suddenly had a strong desire to please God and to do whatever Jesus wanted me to do: get baptized, celebrate the Lord's Supper, develop loving relationships with other believers. You name it, I wanted to do it.

An Ordinary Guy Who Still Has an Anti-God Bias: At times over the years I have strayed to some degree. Sometimes I've gotten a bit legalistic as if I were earning my standing before God by my own good works. I have gotten off track at times by doing things for the wrong reason, like trying to impress other people with how righteous I am. I've often yielded to temptations to sin in various ways. Even today, I'm often forced to admit that the old anti-God bias is still present, alive and well inside

of me. But the Bible always calls me back to admit my sin to God, to myself and to others, seek God's forgiveness and, with His help, continue trusting in Jesus and doing what He says just because I trust in Him. Today, at 75 years of age with my declining years soon to come, my life is filled with the hope of taking ever greater steps of faith and obedience to Jesus and depending on Him to enable me to not only cope with, but flourish through, whatever comes. I also have the greater hope of one day taking part in His glorious kingdom, which will fulfill all the deepest longings of every human heart. What I have experienced, am experiencing and will experience is a wonderful thing. I recommend it to everyone.

My Bible Study Method: For any who might be interested, here's how I study the Bible each day. I read a few verses in the Old Testament, and (this is key) I write down in a notebook in very simple words what I think it's saying. I do this until I sense that God (through the Bible) has said something meaningful to me. Then I do the same thing with the New Testament. Usually, reading five to ten verses in each testament is enough for me. The next day I begin, in each testament, with the next verse after the one where I left off the day before. Be sure to write it all down in a notebook. Try it: you'll be surprised how thrilling it can be.

I hope that you will be like the people mentioned in the Bible who lived in the city of Berea: **"They searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."** (Acts 17:11)

A Darker Vision

Along with the glorious vision described earlier in this booklet, it is only fair to make mention of the fact that the Bible also presents a darker and (for many people) troubling vision of a future day of God's judgment. In addition to great blessings for many people in a perfect place, there will also be pain and punishment for many people in a terrible place.

About 15 years ago an acquaintance of mine told me, "John, I'm no longer a believer in Jesus." I asked, "Why not?" He said, "Because I just can't believe in a God who would send His creatures to Hell forever. That's unbelievably cruel. I can't believe in a God who could do that." I'm sure my acquaintance is not alone. There must be a vast number of people who follow a similar line of thinking. Most people have no objection to the idea of God carrying out a future judgment on the perpetrators of evil acts. It seems reasonable that God would punish people like Hitler and Stalin for the evil acts they committed during their lives. What they find difficult to swallow is the idea that their very nice friends who don't trust in Jesus will end up in a place of punishment forever, right along with Hitler and Stalin.

Many people have taken some of the Bible's statements regarding God's final judgment out of context and distorted them. Let's try to understand the Bible's statements in context and consider what they tell us about God's final judgment. Let's try to enter the Bible's context of thought and then evaluate what our reaction to its teaching ought to be.

In the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve were told that the day they disobeyed God's one command they would surely die. They didn't physically die on that day. However, something did happen to them the very moment they ate the forbidden fruit. They became ashamed of their nakedness. They ran away from God and hid. They were no longer in a right relationship with God. This destruction of their relationship with God is spiritual death. Physical death was also a consequence, but that did not occur until many years later.

The Bible did not explicitly state at that time that their tendency towards sin, as well as the resulting spiritual and physical death, would be passed on to all their descendants, but it continues in a way that seems to make this assumption. Throughout the development of the Bible, details about the final consequences of sin were gradually filled in. Various acts of judgment by God against sin occurred in the Old Testament (the flood of Noah's day, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the plagues of Egypt, etc.). These judgments of God served as warnings of a much greater future judgment of God, which is still to come. There were many statements in the Old Testament affirming that God would one day carry out final judgment on all people (Ecclesiastes 12:14, Psalm 9:1,4,5). Daniel 12 describes a coming day when all people will be raised from the dead to experience either reward or punishment.

In the New Testament, Jesus and His apostles spelled out in greater detail the nature of the coming judgment. The apostle John wrote plainly that **"whoever trusts in the Son will have eternal life, but whoever does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him"** (John 3:36). Jesus also stated that He personally would raise all people back to life from the dead. He would raise some to eternal life and some to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:29). In many other places, Jesus clearly indicated that eternal punishment for sin would be a reality that many people would experience (Matthew 5:29, 10:28, 25:41, Luke 16:23-26).

Paul gave an explanation as to why it is that only believers in Jesus will receive eternal life in Heaven. The perfect righteousness of Jesus is given to believers as a gift from God. This enables God to view them as if they were just as perfect and righteous as Jesus Himself (II Corinthians 5:21). Nonbelievers, on the other hand, do not have the perfect righteousness of Jesus accounted to them.

They have only their own righteousness. No human being's righteousness is adequate to make them acceptable to God. In God's eyes, our human righteousness is no righteousness at all. It is unrighteousness. The experience of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah illustrates this point.

(Isaiah 6:1-7) In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

In this passage, Isaiah was transported in a vision to Heaven, directly into the presence of God. Isaiah was a godly man, perhaps the most righteous man in the nation of Judah in his day. But when he was confronted with the holiness of God, he fell on his face and cried out, **"Woe is me! I'm undone! I'm a man with unclean lips in the middle of a whole lot of people with unclean lips."** Holiness in this sense refers to God's extreme aversion to sin. He cannot and will not allow even the slightest bit of sin in His presence.

Isaiah could not stand being in the direct presence of God. He could not be comfortable or happy or at peace in God's presence. His unworthiness and sinfulness became painfully apparent in the presence of God's evident holiness. By the same token, God is angered by the presence of sin or sinful people in His presence. Holy God and sinful man cannot peacefully co-exist together.

God acted to resolve Isaiah's predicament. He sent an angel to take a piece of coal from the altar and touch Isaiah's lips with it. Then the angel said, **"this has touched your lips, and your guilt is taken away."** The coal represented the altar where, in Old Testament times, sacrifices for sin were offered to God. These sacrifices represented what Jesus would do some day. He would present the ultimate sacrifice that would take away sin and provide perfect righteousness for all believers. So, we can see that without Jesus' giving us His perfect righteousness, none of us (not me, not you, not your very nice neighbors, let alone Stalin or Hitler) has the slightest chance of being accepted in the presence of God.

Where are we going to be then (we must go somewhere), if God has created us to be eternal beings who have a continuing existence beyond this life? We'll be far off from God, separated from His presence, in a place Jesus called "outer darkness." What will it be like for us there? Think about this (Psalm 16:11): **"In Your [that is, God's] presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore."** Those in God's presence experience "fullness of joy" and "pleasures forevermore."

By contrast, those removed from His presence in outer darkness must lack these blessings. Instead of joy, they will have the opposite: sorrow. Instead of pleasures, they will have pain. In other words, they will experience a place of suffering and torment, a place the Bible calls "the lake of fire." That this is the case is pointed out explicitly in the book of Revelation. Revelation 13:8 mentions the book of life of the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world. In this passage, "the Lamb" is a reference to Jesus. His book of life must be the book recording the names of all those who trust in Him. We are led to this conclusion by comparing this verse with John 3:36 (quoted earlier in this booklet). The book of Revelation continues to speak of this book of life in chapter 20:12-15:

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave

up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

These verses tell us that every person who has ever died will be raised back to life. Each one will be judged by their works. Each one will be thrown into the lake of fire. The only exception is that group of people whose names are in the book of life. That’s the book of life already mentioned in chapter 13 containing the names of those who trust in Jesus.

The Bible does tell us that there will be different degrees of punishment. For example, Hitler’s punishments will no doubt be much more severe than our very nice neighbor’s. But they will all end up in the same place: the lake of fire.

Some people say that these descriptions of the lake of fire are figurative and not intended to be taken literally. However, a well-chosen figure is one that accurately describes a situation. If the descriptions of the lake of fire are figurative—then the reality described by these figures is a terrible one. One that should be avoided at all costs. Calling these descriptions figurative doesn’t change a thing.

We can say this about the Bible’s teaching regarding God’s final judgment: there is an internal consistency to it. It progresses from Genesis through Revelation. Throughout the progression, each part is consistent with, and in harmony with, each other part. It makes sense within the framework of thought of the Bible.

The Bible affirms that God’s judgment will be 100% fair and just. It suggests that, at the time it’s carried out, everyone involved will agree that it is just and fair (Romans 3:19). However, there’s nothing in the Bible that would lead us to think that you and I today, in our present culture and with our present thought patterns, will necessarily find ourselves to be in agreement with what the Bible reveals about God’s future judgment. It may not seem right, fair or reasonable to us right now, but we will think very differently about it in the future. Consider how differently Isaiah viewed himself when he came face to face with the holiness of God. In a similar way, we will all see ourselves and God’s judgment very differently when, in the day of judgment, we stand before Him face to face.

How does the Bible instruct us to respond to its teaching about God’s future judgment? The best answer to this question is probably found in Acts 17:30-31:

“[God] now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

This verse is telling us to regard Jesus’ resurrection from the dead as proof that the future judgment will take place exactly as described in the Bible. Rather than complain that the Bible’s teaching about future judgment does not agree with our present ideas of what is just, we should, instead, be asking ourselves this question: “Has Jesus been raised from the dead?” If we are convinced that He has, we should consider that fact to be proof that the future judgment will take place. It will be just and righteous, and, when it occurs, we will all agree that it is.

God, after all, is the one who established the standard of what is just and righteous. Our innate sense of what is just and righteous should be based on the fact that we were created in His image. The Bible requires us to trust in the God who truly exists, as He has revealed Himself to us in its pages. It does not give us the right, like my friend mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, to choose to believe in some other kind of god who exists only in our imaginations.

Concluding Remarks

I welcome your comments and suggestions. This booklet is largely the result of many comments and suggestions that have been received from readers just like you.

If you have comments or questions, email me at: jschleh@juno.com

Also, both this booklet and its sequel, "The Shield," are posted online. This is the link:

<https://www.bibleoutlines.com/john-schleh-booklets>

You can read them there and are welcome to pass the link on to others.

I wish you God's richest blessings.

Rev. John Schleh

About the author: He graduated from Princeton University with a degree in Physics in 1966. He then attended Grace Seminary, from which he graduated in 1969 with an MDiv degree. He served as an assistant pastor for 2 years and then served as an urban missionary to youth in inner city Philadelphia for 42 years. In 2014, he formed Mentoring Ministry, training young men in home renovation skills and Bible study while helping needy families with home repairs. He is presently the director of Mentoring Ministry and is semi-retired.

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