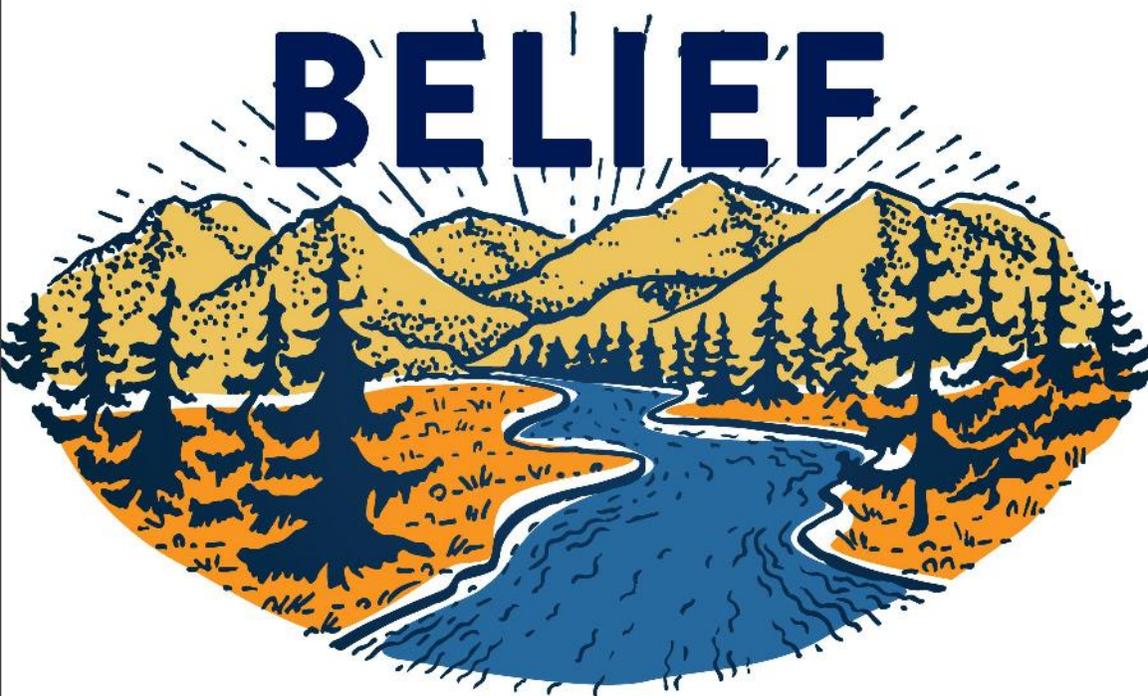


# THE BASICS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF



**BIBLE, THEOLOGY,  
AND LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS**

---

**JOSHUA STRAHAN**

# THE BASICS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

BIBLE, THEOLOGY,  
AND LIFE'S BIG QUESTIONS

---

**JOSHUA STRAHAN**



**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

# Contents

Abbreviations ix

Introduction: *Why Worldview Matters* 1

## **Part 1 The Plotline of Scripture**

1. The Old Testament 15
2. The Life of Jesus 31
3. The New Testament Church 45

## **Part 2 The Apostles' Creed**

4. God the Father 71
5. Jesus Christ 83
6. The Holy Spirit and the Church 99

## **Part 3 A Christian Point of View**

7. The Distinctiveness of the Christian Faith 113
8. Christianity and Life's Big Questions 133
9. Challenges to the Christian System 155
10. Not Blind Faith 173

Appendix A: More about Paul's Theology	189
Appendix B: Hell	201
Notes	205
Scripture Index	221
Subject Index	223

# Introduction

## *Why Worldview Matters*

There are some people . . . —and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a [person] is still his [or her] view of the universe.

—G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*

If you lived in London at the turn of the twentieth century, you would probably be aware of the six-foot-four, three-hundred-pound, bushy-mustachioed, cigar-smoking, sword-cane-wielding British journalist by the name of G. K. Chesterton. This larger-than-life man had a knack for saying something that sounded unreasonable, then going on to show why, in fact, it was quite reasonable. Take Chesterton’s claim above: “There are some people . . . —and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a [person] is still his [or her] view of the universe.”<sup>1</sup> Surely Chesterton is exaggerating, right? Could a person’s view of the universe have any actual, “practical” relevance in the realm of everyday life? And sure, a person’s view of the universe might be interesting, but isn’t calling it “important” a bit much?

Let’s consider Chesterton’s bold claim by examining two “views of the universe”: the worldview assumed by atheism and the worldview assumed by the Lord’s Prayer. The following thought exercise will likely feel simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. Everybody knows what atheism is. And even most people who aren’t Christians have probably heard the Lord’s Prayer in movies or on television. I suspect, however, that many may be unfamiliar with the “practical and important” implications of atheism and the Lord’s Prayer.

I chose atheism and the Lord's Prayer because of the draw they have for me personally—in part because I believe they offer the two most intellectually satisfying systems of thought. I am a Christian who has prayed the Lord's Prayer regularly for more than fifteen years. I know firsthand the intimacy, comfort, strength, and beauty of this prayer. Sometimes, however, atheism appeals to me, especially since Christianity can feel exhausting—intellectually, emotionally, ethically. I grow tired trying to find answers to questions that don't have easy answers. I find it fatiguing to care in a world with so many broken people and broken situations. And I get worn out trying to love my neighbor as myself. So why do I stick with Christianity? There are several reasons, and one of those reasons is that I've considered the practical and important implications of both Christianity and atheism, which we'll now look at in a bit more detail.

## Atheism: The Practical and Important Implications

I recently came across a fascinating book that put forward an atheistic worldview and explained its practical implications. In *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, Alex Rosenberg, professor of philosophy at Duke University, works hard to answer life's big questions.<sup>2</sup> He opens the book by asking, "What is the nature of reality, the purpose of the universe, and the meaning of life? Is there any rhyme or reason to the course of human history? Why am I here? Do I have a soul? . . . What happens when we die? Do we have free will? Why should I be moral?"<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg is asking some great questions, and he is confident that he can provide the answers. He warns the reader, however, that the answers he offers aren't for the faint of heart: "This is a book for those who want to face up to the real answers to these questions. It's a book for people who are comfortable with the truth about reality. This is a book for atheists."<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg explains how we ought to answer life's big questions if we assume that there is no God. He aims to provide a view of reality that is free from all illusions and delusions. In place of this, he hopes to give the reader "an uncompromising, . . . no-nonsense, unsentimental view of the nature of reality."<sup>5</sup>

*The Atheist's Guide to Reality* gives the reader a fairly coherent and reasonable set of answers for how an atheist ought to view the world. Let's take a brief look at Rosenberg's perspective. Along the way, we'll keep in mind Chesterton's claim that the most practical and important thing about a person may indeed be his or her view of the universe. Rosenberg begins by warning the reader that these answers might seem wild, but they are the most logical answers to life's big questions (*if* one assumes God doesn't exist). He writes:

*Is there a God?* No.

*What is the nature of reality?* What physics says it is.

*What is the purpose of the universe?* There is none.

*What is the meaning of life?* Ditto.

*Why am I here?* Just dumb luck.

*Is there a soul? Is it immortal?* Are you kidding?

*Is there free will?* Not a chance!

*What happens when we die?* Everything pretty much goes on as before, except us.

*What is the difference between right and wrong, good and bad?* There is no moral difference between them.

*Why should I be moral?* Because it makes you feel better than being immoral.

*Is abortion, euthanasia, suicide, paying taxes, foreign aid—or anything else you don't like—forbidden, permissible, or sometimes obligatory?* Anything goes.<sup>6</sup>

His logic is pretty sound overall. For Rosenberg, since there is no God, reality is limited to the natural world. In other words, when we take away the supernatural or spiritual, all that's left is the natural. Therefore, all the answers to life's big questions must be limited to the material, physical world. For the consistent atheist, Rosenberg won't allow cheating by appeal to some mystical or spiritual realms, which seem to require unsubstantiated faith in something beyond the natural world. So where does that lead him? I'll summarize: *There is no purpose. There is no meaning. There is no soul. There is no objective morality. There is no free will. There is no self. There is only the illusion of these things, which we humans evolved because it aids our survival.* It's hard to quibble with Rosenberg if we play by his rules, which we'll examine in more detail in later chapters. Many atheists seem to come to the same basic conclusions—even if they are not as blunt about it as Rosenberg.

Now that we have a description of an atheistic view of the universe, let's think about its practical and important implications. One way of getting at this is to think about one's view of the universe as eyeglasses. If a person has glasses, she can look both *at* the lenses and *through* them.<sup>7</sup> She can look *at* the lenses, noting whether they are scratched or smudged, but she can also wear the glasses and see the world *through* the lenses. We've just taken a quick look *at* the lenses of atheism. To better understand atheism's practical and important implications, we now need to put on these glasses and see the world *through* them.

What might it be like to wear these lenses throughout a typical day? What follows is just a thought experiment. I don't propose to tell you what goes through every atheist's head on an average day. My guess is that, like most people, many atheists have a hard time looking through their worldview lenses consistently all day. But let's give it a shot anyway.

*You wake up, turn off your alarm, take a shower, and then give yourself a look in the mirror. The person you see looking back at you isn't subject to pressure from any ultimate moral obligations . . . but neither does this person have a soul or lasting personhood. You're just a temporary and complex combination of molecules. You head to the kitchen for a quick bite or a cup of coffee, and there you run into a loved one. While you enjoy the bond you share with this person, your lenses help you see through this feeling, letting you know that what you're feeling isn't capital L Love—which doesn't really exist. Instead, you're merely feeling a strong evolutionary bond that has helped our species survive by giving us the instinct to care for one another. This feeling of love is nice, but it's not pointing to some deeper reality where Love courses through the universe or some such sentimental nonsense. It's just a chemical reaction in your body.*

*As you get ready for work or school, you come across a news story about some tragedy—kidnapping or terrorism or sex trafficking. Instinctively you sense the wrongness of the situation. But as you look at this more clearly through your lenses, you can see that, even though you may feel some moral outrage, it's hard to justify this feeling when you know there is no ultimate right or wrong. That's a bit disorienting, but then again, at least you don't have to feel obligated to empathize or help in any way. Of course, you can if it makes you feel good—but there's no ultimate moral pressure, just herd instinct. You then head off to work or school. Whatever your job is or whatever subject you're studying at school, it's nice knowing that you don't have to be that anxious about it, because everything is ultimately meaningless. And yet it feels kind of empty knowing that nothing you do is of any lasting importance.*

*Eventually the workday ends and you hopefully get to spend your evening doing what you feel like—watching television or hanging out with friends or scrolling through social media or playing music or exercising or online gaming or viewing pornography. And, if you are wondering if you had any real choice about how you spent your evening, your lenses would help you see that you probably did not (even if it feels like you did). After all, there's no spiritual or mental realm that gives you independent power over the natural world; instead, as you see it, this world inevitably follows the blind laws of*

*nature.*<sup>8</sup> *Free will is just another illusion that comforts the masses but not you—you see things differently. The day comes to an end, so you head to bed and fall asleep, aware that another twenty-four hours of your finite existence have ticked away.*

After looking through these lenses, we may start thinking that Chesterton is right: a person's view of the universe has practical and important implications—even in our everyday, individual lives. We just imagined how it might shape how we view ourselves, our purpose, our loved ones, our world, our responsibilities, our worth, our leisure, our freedom, and our evaluation of world events. And it's not hard to imagine how it might also inform our hopes, our fears, our victories, our regrets, our gains, and our losses. So far, we've been looking through these lenses from one individual's perspective, but we can also think about the practical importance of such lenses at a communal level. Consider the impact on a culture if everyone wore such lenses—how it might affect education, politics, economics, ethics, and the arts if a society embraced the notion that there was no ultimate purpose, objective morality, free will, soul, or lasting personhood.

Perhaps the significance of this will become clearer when we look at the worldview assumed by the Lord's Prayer. But before we turn there, we need to consider something else that our thought experiment reveals: the limitations of worldview.

## Is Worldview Enough?

What Chesterton refers to as one's "view of the universe" is what we might today call one's worldview or metanarrative. It's the big picture, or overarching story, that helps us make sense of our lives. In *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, Alex Rosenberg sketches out the worldview of atheism, offering a wide-angle perspective on life as an atheist might see it. And much of what I'll be doing in this book is offering the worldview or metanarrative of Christianity. But here's the catch: *many of us find that our self-professed worldviews don't always align with our lives.* For example, although many atheists agree with Rosenberg's worldview description, they don't maintain the unsentimental, detached perspective that Rosenberg describes. Many people don't actually "see" through these lenses consistently throughout their day. Consider the thought experiment we just went through. Does anyone—even the committed atheist—actually maintain such a detached view all day long? Instead, many atheists have moments throughout their daily lives where they act as

though there *is* real love, real personhood, real morality, real free will, and real purpose.

This helps us discover that our self-professed worldviews are not all that guide us, because we humans are more than “thinking things,” as philosopher James K. A. Smith likes to say.<sup>9</sup> Smith rightly reminds us that we don’t always follow our conscious thoughts; often we follow our hearts or guts instead. We follow our hearts, not realizing that our hearts are being calibrated by things we rarely *think* about—things like our habits, our rhythms, and our culture’s recurring message about what “the good life” looks like.<sup>10</sup>

If Smith is correct, perhaps the reason that some atheists’ lives don’t match their thinking is that their hearts are being shaped by a rival vision of life—a vision of the good life in which Love and free will and purpose and morality are real. But please don’t hear me singling out atheists. Many Christians do the same thing. We Christians are often guilty of thinking one way and acting another. We claim to believe that mercy and compassion and humility and generosity are vital, yet we follow our hearts in another direction as they are drawn toward a vision of the good life that is materialistic and self-absorbed.

So why am I bothering to write a book on the Christian metanarrative when we humans are more than thinking things? I have three reasons:

1. Although we aren’t *only* “thinking things,” we *partly* are. How we think matters; and while thinking may not shape everything about us, it can profoundly impact our lives, especially when we combine right thinking with right practices. The mind matters, even if it’s not the only thing that matters.
2. Paying close attention to our worldviews can help reveal a disconnect between what we claim and how we live. When a Christian notices that her worldview isn’t aligning with her life, it should send a signal that something is off: perhaps she’s not thinking clearly, perhaps her habits and practices are miscalibrating her heart, or perhaps she needs to question whether the Christian worldview is true and accurate. Whatever it is, it calls for us to attend to it. Similarly, when the atheist sees the disconnect between her worldview and her life, this may send a signal that something is off: perhaps she’s not thinking clearly, perhaps her habits and practices are miscalibrating her heart, or perhaps she needs to question whether the atheistic worldview is true and accurate. Whatever it is, she would be wise to make sense of this disconnect.
3. Writing about the Christian worldview is not simply an intellectual exercise. The Christian metanarrative is so beautiful and so compelling

that it speaks not only to our minds but also to our hearts, to our deepest instincts, to our gut sense of what truly is the good life. For those who think Christianity is simply boring, Dorothy Sayers writes, “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma *is* the drama. . . . [If] we think it dull it is because we either have never really read those amazing documents, or have recited them so often and so mechanically as to have lost all sense of their meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

Our view of the universe matters, but we hold that view not simply in our minds but also in our hearts.

Next we turn our attention to the Lord’s Prayer. In what follows, the Lord’s Prayer is like a focal point, allowing me to offer a glimpse of my own personal experience of the beauty and weightiness of the Christian metanarrative. It’s my firsthand account of the “practical and important” ways that the Christian worldview has shaped both my heart and my mind.

## The Lord’s Prayer: The Practical and Important Implications

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
    on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
    as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
    but deliver us from the evil one.

—Jesus (Matt. 6:9–13 NIV)

If I were asked what practice has impacted my life the most, I’d say it’s praying the Lord’s Prayer on a daily basis. The prayer isn’t some magic formula: chant it three times, then God grants your requests. Instead, the prayer is like a seed that, with proper care and nourishment, can grow into something beautiful. I didn’t know this when I started praying the Lord’s Prayer. I simply understood that it was a good thing to do. Now, over a decade and a half later, I can speak to how God has used this simple prayer to transform my heart and mind. In what follows, don’t get bogged down by what may be unfamiliar language (kingdom, debts, heaven, etc.); instead, pay attention to how this

prayer has shaped my worldview, how it has taught me to see myself and the world around me. We'll get into more specific details in the following chapters.

The prayer begins with the words "Our Father."<sup>12</sup> It may sound strange, but for years I struggled to call God "Father." I don't have any baggage with my own dad; in fact, he's a wonderful man. But I was aware of my own sin, those stains on my soul—and it simply felt presumptuous to call God something as intimate as "Father" when I was so deeply aware of my own brokenness, faults, and repeated sins. But Jesus taught his followers to pray this prayer, so I stuck with it. Some mornings my prayer never went further than the word "Father." I'd just sit there, wrestling with this paradox: how can I, a sinful human, call the holy and divine one "Father"? Over time, though, the seed began to sprout, and the truth grew in my heart that I was a beloved child of Father God—not because I was perfect but because he was loving. God is holy and just and rightly to be feared; yet because of what Jesus has done, God is first and foremost my Father. To grasp this most basic idea was to shed so much personal baggage along with so many misconceptions about God. It was revolutionary. *I know who I am: a beloved child of God.* Everything I do can proceed from the foundation of this love.

God is not merely Father, but Father "in heaven." He is perfectly loving and good, the creator and sustainer of all things. I may call him Father, but I must also respect God as the sovereign and all-powerful Lord. When I see the world through such a lens, I see a world that is not out of control, that is not driven along by chance. It's a world governed by a loving and powerful God who is working all things for the good according to his justice and mercy.

As we continue in the prayer, we come to three closely related phrases: "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We could tease out the different emphases in these expressions, but for our purposes, I'll merely point out how these three phrases have together affected me. When I say, "hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done," I find that it orients my life around God and his purposes. I don't think I'm a narcissist—which is probably what a narcissist would say!—but I still find that I can default into a kind of self-centered attitude. I can become overly focused on my own wants and needs and concerns. But praying these words trains me to long for something more: to desire God's good will to take effect across the world, to hope for God's kingdom to come with peace and justice, and to yearn for God's name to be held in proper reverence (because when creatures don't acknowledge their creator, everything gets out of balance). If, as Smith argues, our hearts are steered by our vision of the good life, then this part of the prayer is a way of aligning my heart with Jesus's teaching about the good life.

The prayer continues: “Give us today our daily bread.” I know that God cares for us in our totality, so I pray for God to provide for my physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs for the day ahead. But I don’t stop with my own needs. When we take notice of the “our” and “us” language in the Lord’s Prayer, it reminds us to extend our concern beyond our individual selves so that it includes others. To help with this, I envision my prayer moving outward in something like concentric circles: I pray for myself, then my family, then my friends, then my nation, then the world. Praying for daily bread can produce gratitude, compassion, and humility. It helps me be grateful for the overabundance I experience. It also trains me to have compassion for those who desperately lack daily bread. And it humbles me, because I know that everything I have can ultimately be traced back to God’s provision.

When I pray “forgive us our debts,” I’m reminded not only that I’ve done wrong and that those wrongs need pardoning but also that God has anticipated this. Keep in mind, this prayer is for *daily* use. After all, we are also praying for today’s daily bread. That leads me to believe that God anticipates us needing forgiveness every day. He recognizes our weakness; he knows what we’re up against. God’s response is not, “Oh? You’re already back. You need forgiveness again? But I just pardoned you yesterday!” Instead, Jesus taught us that we can daily ask for forgiveness from our Father. This does not mean that we take sin lightly or that we presume on God’s grace. To truly ask for forgiveness is to recognize the weightiness of our sin and guilt. However, we need not wallow in shame and self-loathing: God is our Father who loves us and graciously forgives us—every day.

My own instinct is to rearrange the prayer by moving this request for forgiveness to the front of the prayer rather than leaving it at the end, and sometimes that may be appropriate. But I’ve found comfort in resisting that instinct and keeping this request at the end of the prayer. It reminds me that God is my Father and provider of my daily needs, even before I ask pardon for my sins. God does not stop being my Father when I sin and then resume that role when I ask for forgiveness. God’s bond with me is stronger and more enduring than that.

We don’t pray simply “forgive us”; we pray forgive us “as we have also forgiven our debtors.” For years I held on to a grudge, even though I was regularly praying this line in the prayer. I was apparently just mouthing this whole bit about forgiving others. Then one day I was praying the Lord’s Prayer and found myself struggling to accept that God had forgiven me. It was wearing on me that I was struggling with the same old sins for years—asking God yet again for forgiveness. The guilt left me feeling the need to earn

God’s pardon. Although I knew better, I couldn’t help but feel that perhaps I needed to grovel, feel an extended period of self-loathing, or balance out my sins with some good deeds. And yet the Lord’s Prayer refused to let me go there—forgiveness was God’s merciful gift to me, offered freely. I merely had to ask in sincerity. As that reality slowly began to take root, I discovered that I had been unwilling to forgive a particular person because I had been waiting for that person to “earn” my forgiveness. I wanted that person to first show appropriate remorse and to take steps to change before I gave my forgiveness. When I discovered this, I was completely caught off guard. I could not continue looking to God for mercy while I myself was withholding mercy. And so the grudge I was holding began to lift.<sup>13</sup> I was learning to forgive as I’d been forgiven.

Last, we pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” As I pray this line, I am reminded that I cannot do this journey alone. I’m not strong enough by myself. I need God to walk alongside me, strengthening me through times of temptation and testing. Evil is real. But so is God—and God is stronger, so I need not live in fear or hopelessness.

I pray the Lord’s Prayer in the morning; then my day begins, and the practical and important implications of this prayer go with me, shaping how I view myself, my wife, my children, my job, my enemies, my leisure, my obligations, my world, my hopes, my fears, and my longings. If you’re curious how the Christian metanarrative speaks to some of the issues we mentioned earlier (like purpose, morality, personhood, free will, and the soul), we’ll get there. But it seems better to start with something a bit more personal.

## A Preview of What’s Ahead

In the rest of the book, I will present a sketch of a Christian worldview and explain why I think it is compelling at both an intellectual and an instinctive level. First, we’ll take a journey through the story line of Scripture (chaps. 1 through 3). Then, in chapters 4 through 6 we’ll look closely at the Apostles’ Creed, which is a statement of faith that the church has been confessing from early in its history. In the final section of the book, we’ll consider what a Christian point of view might look like. Specifically, in chapter 7 we’ll highlight some distinctive characteristics of the Christian faith by comparing it to a few other worldviews—sometimes a bit of contrast is needed to help us see what makes something distinctly special. Then, in chapter 8 we’ll reflect on how the Christian worldview speaks to life’s big questions—questions about purpose, morality, free will, the soul, and personhood. In chapter 9 we’ll address some

reasons that people commonly give for rejecting Christianity. Last, in chapter 10 we'll consider several reasons why Christianity is a uniquely compelling worldview. Hopefully by the end of our study it'll be clear why, in the words of Chesterton, the most practical and important thing about a person is his or her view of the universe.

PART 1

---

# THE PLOTLINE OF SCRIPTURE

# 1

---

## The Old Testament

I've worn glasses since I was eight years old. Before that, my vision was blurry enough that I had to find creative ways to get by. For example, when people weren't close enough for me to make out their faces, I learned to tell who they were by the way they walked, by their distinct gaits and strides. The odd thing is that I had no idea my vision was bad. I assumed that life was just as fuzzy for everybody else. I didn't ask to go see the optometrist because I didn't know that I needed to see the optometrist. Then came the day that someone realized I needed glasses, and soon after that I saw the world in high definition for the first time. It was life changing. Imagine seeing a tree for the first time in all its wonder—the majesty of this giant, living plant in sharp focus, top to bottom, with all the contrasts of shape and color and lighting and movement. Life with glasses was not only easier to navigate but also more beautiful, for I could really see.

I think the Christian worldview is a bit like putting on glasses that allow us to see the world in greater focus, revealing a world that is full of beauty and meaning. Over the next several chapters we will look both *at* and *through* the lenses of a Christian worldview. In chapters 1 through 6 we are primarily looking *at* the lenses. We might think of this as our way of ensuring that the lenses are free of smudges and that they're the right prescription. There are a lot of glasses on the market that are labeled “Christian,” but some are knock-off products—trendy frames with cheap lenses that don't actually help one see better. So we need to take the time to look closely at the Christian lenses, primarily by studying the stories and teachings that are found in Christian

Scripture. Then, later in the book we will focus on looking *through* these lenses and consider how Christianity offers a distinct way of seeing our lives and the world we live in. Hopefully this will bring the beauty and brokenness of our world into sharper focus.

To know what Christianity is, we need to start with the Christian story. In the same way that we don't really know people until we know their stories—where they've been and what they've been through—we can't really know the Christian faith until we know the Christian story. And this story goes all the way back to the beginning. Technically, it goes back before there was a beginning.<sup>1</sup>

## The Beginning

The first chapter of the first book of the Bible describes the creation of the universe in beautiful, near-poetic language. There is structure and symmetry and delight: God speaks, what he speaks happens, and it's declared "good." In fact, the term "good" shows up seven times in this first chapter of Genesis, making it abundantly clear that God approves of what he's made.<sup>2</sup> The high point of creation is humanity. Genesis tells us that humans are made in God's image, male and female. This is a way of saying that men and women have special dignity and purpose and distinction.<sup>3</sup> Humans are called to "image" God, representing God's benevolent care by tending and wisely ruling God's good creation. We'll have to keep reading the biblical story to learn more about what this means.

Today the Genesis account of creation seems to clash with modern science. Genesis probably sounded bizarre to its ancient audience as well, though for different reasons. We can see this when Genesis is compared with other ancient creation accounts (such as *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish*).<sup>4</sup> Three differences stand out:

1. The Genesis account is monotheistic, which means it recognizes only one unrivalled God at a time when polytheism (multiple gods) was the standard religious view. It's not surprising that there are multiple gods in *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish*; it is surprising that there is only one God in Genesis.
2. In Genesis, God simply speaks the cosmos into order and declares it good, unlike in some other ancient creation accounts where the world results from the warring and violence of the gods. For instance, in the *Enuma Elish* the bloody remains of a slain god become building blocks for creation.

3. In Genesis, humans have inherent dignity and value: they bear the image of God and are tasked with caring for and ruling over creation. In contrast, in both *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish* humans lack such dignity and are tasked with doing the burdensome work of providing food for the gods—because these gods (unlike the God of Genesis) need food!<sup>5</sup>

Although I'll visit this in more detail in chapter 7, it might be helpful to go ahead and point out how what would have seemed odd in the ancient world has become commonplace today. That is to say, in popular culture it's common to take for granted that the natural world has a “goodness” to it, that humans have inherent dignity, that monotheism is more likely than polytheism, and that a real god wouldn't need food.

The biblical story starts out promising, but things quickly go south. After presenting a wide-angle, cosmic account of creation, Genesis zooms in to focus on two humans—Adam and Eve. The setting is the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve are dwelling in something like paradise. Two trees dominate Eden's landscape: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve were permitted to eat from the tree of life, and as long as they ate from it, they wouldn't die. They were forbidden from eating from the other tree, though. It's never specified precisely why this was forbidden. Perhaps it was simply a way to train or test Adam's and Eve's obedience: Would they give God the obedience that was due their creator? Perhaps it was about pride and patience: Would they trust God, or would they take matters into their own hands? Perhaps it was about gratitude: Would they be content with the good life God had provided? Whatever the reason, a scheming serpent comes on the scene and successfully tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. Eve, in turn, gets Adam to eat the fruit. The result of their transgression is commonly referred to as “the fall.” From this point on we'll begin to see the gravitational pull of sin, which tears down the good creation that God has built up.<sup>6</sup>

Adam and Eve are exiled from paradise. They no longer have access to the tree of life, which means they will inevitably die. Other consequences result from their violation. In short, a pervasive corruption makes its presence felt in the world, causing damage physically, socially, and spiritually.<sup>7</sup>

- We see *physical brokenness*, as Genesis narrates how Adam and Eve will eventually die, how humanity's labor takes on a burdensome quality, and how the plants and soil may have become corrupted as they no longer produce vegetation as they once did. Even the nonhuman creation experiences ramifications from human disobedience.

- As for *social brokenness*, we read that man and woman will be at odds. Instead of naturally appreciating and valuing each other as partners, they will develop an unhealthy power struggle.
- Next, Genesis captures the *spiritual brokenness* that has set in: Adam and Eve no longer feel so close with God, so unashamed and vulnerable (which is symbolized by their previous nakedness in Eden); instead, they feel ashamed and distant from God (symbolized by their hiding from God and clothing themselves). Their fractured relationship with God is the overarching consequence: to be less connected with the source of life and goodness will inevitably lead to a systemic breakdown, to death—physically, socially, and spiritually.

To be clear, the physical and social and spiritual are all intertwined and perhaps inseparable. I distinguish them to draw our attention to the *holistic* consequences of sin, so that we don't think of sin as operating at only one specific level while leaving the rest of human existence and the creation untouched.

After the humans are exiled from Eden, Genesis narrates something of a downward spiral as sin and human rebellion grow more intense. This is especially captured by the narration of increasing violence: first one brother kills another (Cain and Abel); then Lamech brags of his murderous vengeance; and soon enough the earth is described as “filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11). How might God respond to this? What will he do now that his good creation is corrupted? In what seems to us an unexpected move, God sets in motion a plan to deal with the world's brokenness, and his plan will start with a seventy-five-year-old man (Abraham), his sixty-five-year-old wife (Sarah), and their infertility.

## Abraham

Without any backstory or explanation, God calls Abraham and says to him:

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.

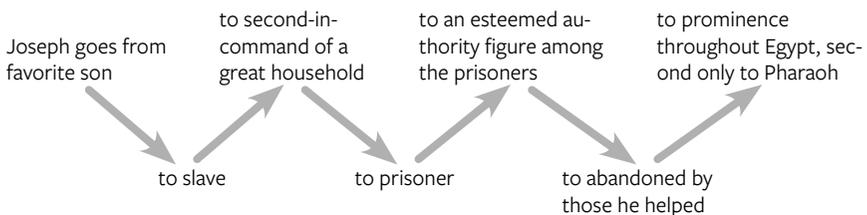
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:1–3 NIV)

This is an astounding promise. God is calling this seventy-five-year-old man to leave everything behind based on a promise to make his lineage great in number, blessing, renown, and impact. But isn't Abraham a bit old for this? God better hurry things up! Instead, twenty-five years pass without God delivering on his promise. Despite the delay, God again reiterates his promise: a child will be born to Abraham (now one hundred) and Sarah (now ninety), and through this child God will make good on his promise. Sure enough, God is true to his word, and Sarah gives birth to a son, Isaac.

Isaac grows up and has twin sons, the younger of which is Jacob. God chooses Jacob's lineage to fulfill the promise he earlier made to Abraham—the promise of land, numerous descendants, and to be a blessing to the world. Jacob is a fascinating and frustrating character, a bit of an antihero. He often seems more sinner than saint. For example, he exploits his hungry brother and deceives his ailing, blind father. Somewhat surprisingly, many of the Bible's heroes are not one-dimensional characters. They're not presented as perfect people who always make the right choice. Instead, their lives are often messy and complicated, sometimes showing incredible faith, sometimes showing cringeworthy doubt. Moments of sacrifice, vulnerability, and faith are followed by moments of deception, seizing control, and scandal. Even so, Jacob manages to distinguish himself as a particularly dubious character. As the story unfolds, Jacob has many children by multiple wives. This part of the narrative reads something like a dark comedy—some humorous moments played out in front of the gloomy backdrop of Jacob's polygamy. Yet God appears willing to use Jacob's broken circumstance to bring blessing, as though God realizes that if he's going to partner with humans, he has to meet them in the midst of their messiness.

The biblical story eventually shifts its focus onto Jacob's twelfth and favorite son, Joseph. In yet another head-smacking move, Jacob flaunts his favoritism for Joseph, thereby arousing envy among Joseph's brothers. The brothers grow so jealous that they seize Joseph, sell him into slavery, and feed Jacob the lie that Joseph was torn to pieces by a wild animal. Joseph is isolated from everyone—except God. God does not abandon Joseph but works through this dire situation to bring about blessing. What follows in Genesis is a series of ups and downs in Joseph's life.



Throughout Joseph's roller coaster of a life, two things remain fairly constant: God does not abandon Joseph (even when it seems as though he has), and Joseph does not abandon God (even when it seems as though he perhaps should).

While Joseph is in Egypt, a great famine devastates the surrounding regions, which eventually brings Joseph's estranged brothers to Egypt in search of food. This results in one of the most touching reunions in Scripture. When Joseph's brothers recognize the brother whom they betrayed, they are terrified. Joseph, however, welling with tears, extends not only mercy but also an invitation to come to Egypt where they can escape the worst of the famine. And so the book of Genesis comes to an end with Joseph, his brothers, and his father all in Egypt.

At this point, the reader may be wondering how any of this fits into God's earlier promises of land, descendants, and blessing. After all, the promised land was in Canaan, not Egypt; Abraham now has many descendants but nowhere near the multitude God had promised; and while the nations have been blessed with provision during a great famine, one might wonder about the larger blessing needed in light of the pervasive corruption that we found after Eden—that physical, social, and spiritual brokenness. We need to keep reading, because the story isn't over.

## Exodus

After Joseph dies, things take a turn for the worse. Jacob's descendants—who are called "Israelites" (since Jacob's other name is Israel)—become enslaved by the Egyptians. After hundreds of years of slavery, God sends a reluctant deliverer: Moses.<sup>8</sup> Moses and his brother, Aaron, come to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, with a warning: let the Israelites go . . . or else. Pharaoh unwisely chooses the "or else" option, which leads to a series of plagues and disasters unleashed by God. Pharaoh eventually relents; he is no match for the Israelites' powerful God. Pharaoh releases the Israelite slaves, only to quickly change his mind and chase them down, intending to re-enslave them. The Israelites find themselves trapped between a sea and the Egyptian army. God provides rescue in dramatic fashion: he parts the waters, allowing Israel to cross through the sea on dry ground. When Pharaoh charges after the Israelites, God brings the waters crashing down on Pharaoh and his army, ensuring Israel's freedom and demonstrating God's power and protection.

Having rescued the Israelites, God establishes a covenant with them. According to the terms of the covenant, God will be their God and will provide for them, and they will be God's people and follow his ways. The covenant

contains a set of laws and guidelines, the most well-known of which are the Ten Commandments. The covenant guidelines, known as the law or torah, are early steps toward addressing physical, social, and spiritual brokenness. For example, we find laws dealing with animals, land, and sickness (physical restoration), laws instructing people how to wisely and justly interact with one another (social restoration), and laws teaching the people how to be in relationship with God (spiritual restoration). God is gradually bringing holistic restoration to the world. The people of Israel are to be a part of that plan, and the law will help guide them. Perhaps the pinnacle of the covenant is God's willingness to dwell with Israel in a special way, being uniquely present among them in the tabernacle, which is a kind of portable sanctuary.

### **Excursus**

#### ***Christians and the Torah***

As Christians think about the Old Testament law (torah), we should keep in mind five things. First, according to Jesus, the law is ultimately designed for shaping people to love God wholeheartedly and to love their neighbors as themselves (Matt. 22:35–40). It is not meant to be oppressive, arbitrary, or self-serving; it is meant to promote love and justice.

Second, Jesus shows that the law is, in some ways, a temporary or unfinished code. For example, Jesus points out the preliminary nature of at least some of the law, such as the guidelines related to divorce (Matt. 19:1–9). Jesus explains how God took into account the people's brokenness when he gave certain instructions, even though such instructions may fall short of God's original intent for humans (Matt. 19:8). In other words, the law may not fully meet God's standard; instead, the law is a bit like a moral stepping-stone, something accessible to people who are taking early steps in their moral development. This helps explain why some laws seem problematic to us today (such as laws pertaining to slavery and women). When such laws were given, they were progressive in their ancient context, moving Israel's ethic forward from where it was. From today's viewpoint, though, such laws might seem regressive, because we forget that God was meeting an ancient people in their ancient context (and not our contemporary context).

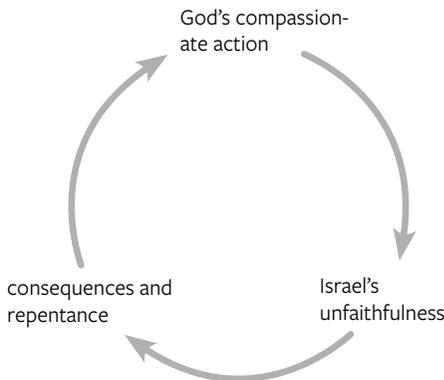
Third, it is difficult to understand the purpose that some laws serve, especially certain dietary and purity laws. Based on the overall sensibleness of the law as a whole, those now-confusing laws likely made good ethical sense in their original setting, but that setting is now lost to us. This makes it hard to do much more than conjecture about those laws' purposes.

Fourth, humans were made in the image of God—that is, they were to represent God in their wise and benevolent caring for creation. This theme continues with Israel’s story. In fact, God refers to Israel as a “kingdom and priests” (Exod. 19:6). The Israelites were to take up their kingly and priestly vocations by properly representing God’s wise, loving, and just rule. It would seem, then, that the law was intended to guide Israel in carrying out that mission as they bless the nations by faithfully and accurately reflecting God’s good will and wisdom to a broken and suffering world (Deut. 4:6–8).

Fifth, as Richard Middleton reminds us, “Grace comes before law; the gift of deliverance precedes the obligation of duty or obedience.” That is, Israel doesn’t earn God’s love by keeping the torah; God loves first (which means the law is itself a loving gift). The law is intended to be not burdensome but beneficial—a gift to guide the people in living wisely and justly.

## Israel

Hundreds of years earlier in our story, God made Abraham several promises, one of which was to give Abraham the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8). A lot has happened since that time. Now, after the great exodus from slavery in Egypt, God is finally preparing Abraham’s descendants to enter and take the promised land. Although the Israelites will eventually receive the land, it does not result in a happily-ever-after ending. Instead, the Israelites get stuck in a repetitive cycle of God’s compassionate action, followed not long after by Israel’s disobedience, then by Israel receiving the consequences for their actions and repenting, before the cycle restarts with God’s compassionate restoration of his people.



A short example may help to illustrate: after God rescues Israel out of Egyptian slavery and provides food for them in the desert (God's compassionate action), the Israelites refuse to trust that God will help drive out the Canaanites from the promised land (Israel's unfaithfulness), so the Israelites are left in limbo, wandering in the wilderness for forty years until the next generation arises and is willing to trust God (consequences and repentance), at which point God leads the people into the promised land under Moses's successor, Joshua (God's compassionate action).<sup>10</sup>

After the Israelites leave the desert and enter the promised land, the cycle continues. God raises up leaders ("judges") to deliver the slow-to-learn Israelites from various troubles, but these judges are often just as messed up themselves. Not surprisingly, things go awry, and God comes to the rescue—again. At some point, the Israelites get the notion that what they need is a king "like all the other nations have" (1 Sam. 8:5). If they were wise, they would have recognized that God was their true king, and they would have conducted their lives in a way that attested to this. Even God grieves about how "they've rejected me as king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). But they are stubbornly determined to get a human king, and God grants their request.

At first, it seems as though things might turn out okay. Israel's first king, Saul, gets off to a promising start. Soon enough, though, his rule is marred by disobedience and faithlessness. Saul's life spirals downward until it comes to a tragic conclusion, ending on the point of his own sword. Saul is succeeded by Israel's most famous king—David. This is the great biblical hero who, armed with a sling and tremendous faith in his God, takes down the mighty Goliath. God delights in David, even calling him "a man after [my] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14 NIV). God makes a promise to King David that will echo over Israel's story from this point on: "Your dynasty and your kingdom will be secured forever before me. Your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). Whatever God is going to do through David's lineage, it is to be of tremendous importance. It's worth pausing to notice that, although Israel goes against God by appointing a king, God chooses to partner with his people and work alongside their unwise choice.

David's reign is one of the high points in Israel's history as he leads the people in many victorious battles while demonstrating passionate devotion to God. Unfortunately, in a sad turn of events, David—this man after God's own heart—proves that even he is not immune to the persistent pull of sin. David's devotion to God turns to complacency and then to discontent—ultimately culminating with David having an affair with his soldier's wife and then having that soldier killed to cover up his wrongdoing. It's a shocking, tragic moment. All the hope and excitement seem to be slipping out

of Israel's reach.<sup>11</sup> Even the best of kings could not be the leader that Israel truly needed.

David's son Solomon eventually takes over as king. Like his father before him, Solomon has a promising start to his reign. He shows humility, asks God for wisdom to rule justly, and practices godly devotion; he builds a magnificent temple for God—a grand, permanent dwelling to replace the portable tabernacle. Might hope be restored? Unfortunately, things take a (now predictable) turn for the worse. For example, Solomon appears to ignore the torah's instructions for the king. According to the torah, a king should not acquire too many horses (likely a reference to building a large military force), nor is he to marry numerous wives (thereby acquiring foreign alliances and foreign gods), nor is he to amass great wealth, nor is he to be overbearing toward his subjects (Deut. 17:16–20). These kingly laws appear designed, in part, to protect the king's heart and his allegiance, helping him put his trust in God rather than in military might, foreign allies, other gods, or money. And yet the “wise” King Solomon goes a different route—accumulating wives and horses while overburdening his subjects.<sup>12</sup>

As Solomon's reign comes to an end, the kingdom of Israel starts unraveling—a consequence of Solomon's unfaithfulness (1 Kings 11:9–13). It is clear that Israel needs a king similar to the one described in those kingly laws. Perhaps we can glimpse here a bit of foreshadowing in the law's vision of the ideal king: one who would not trust in military might, who would not seek alliance with the world powers, who would not be led astray by lust and greed, who would not be overbearing but would love his people (maybe even enough to die for them)—a king whose heart is truly, wholly, and perfectly after God's own.

## Division and Exile

Solomon's son Rehoboam becomes king, and his oppressive policies are the final straw that breaks the fragile Israelite kingdom in two. The southern kingdom (referred to as Judah) will be ruled by David's lineage, and the northern kingdom (confusingly referred to as Israel) will be ruled by various dynasties. The northern kingdom is kind of a moral train wreck, consistently governed by faithless kings. Eventually the northern kingdom falls when God hands the people over to the Assyrian army in the eighth century BC.

The southern kingdom (through which Jesus's lineage is traced) is, morally speaking, something of a mixed bag, producing some faithful kings and some unfaithful kings. In the sixth century BC, the Babylonian Empire conquers

the southern kingdom, destroys the temple and Jerusalem, and drives the people out of their land and into exile. Thus ends (temporally, at least) the sovereign kingdom of Israel, though a king from David's line is still alive in Babylon—a possible sign of hope.

After a while, the Israelites who were exiled are allowed to return home, but they do so in a subdued fashion. David Nienhuis sums up this stage of Israelite history: “Ultimately the Persians, under the leadership of King Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus allowed the people of Judah . . . to return to their ancestral land. While they were allowed to rebuild God's temple and reestablish worship, they did not possess the land God promised to them, and they were not allowed to have their own king. The [Old Testament] story of Israel ends with God's people waiting and wondering how (or if) God would complete the plan to restore the creation through the people of Israel.”<sup>13</sup>

For centuries after this, the Israelites may have been asking themselves questions such as the following: What are we to make of God's earlier promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—promises of land, descendants, and blessing? Has Israel broken the covenant beyond repair? Will God still use Abraham's descendants to bless the nations? Has David's line become so corrupt that God's promise to him of an everlasting dynasty is now nothing more than a squandered birthright?

## Prophets and Promises

To add to the uncertainties mentioned above, we might consider some mysterious references that show up in the Old Testament. Throughout Israel's ups and downs, its division, defeats, exile, and return, God continues to speak to his people through prophets. Often, the prophets are merely calling the Israelite people to keep covenant faithfulness with God. As one prophet succinctly put it, “What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8 NIV). Sometimes, though, the prophets make references to the future. Four such prophecies are of special importance for our study.

First, the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God will make with his people, distinct from the covenant he made when he gave Israel the law. God declares:

This is the covenant I will make with  
the people of Israel. . . .  
I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God  
 and they will be my people.  
 No longer will they . . . say to one another,  
 “Know the LORD,”  
 because they will all know me,  
 from the least of them to the greatest. . . .  
 For I will forgive their wickedness  
 and remember their sins no more. (Jer. 31:33–34 NIV)

According to this new covenant, God promises a time when he will be known more intimately, when he will forgive sins in a more complete fashion, and when he will empower the people to live more faithfully. But when will this happen, and how will he accomplish it?

Second, we might consider a prophecy from Daniel, a moral exemplar known for his courage, faithfulness, and piety. Daniel has a vision of “one like a son of man . . . [who] was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14 NIV). As we consider this prophecy, we should recall God’s promise to King David of an everlasting dynasty. Notice that Daniel describes something that could be in conflict with God’s promise to David: Daniel envisions a divine-like figure of glory and power who will have an everlasting dominion, triumphing over all other kingdoms. How will God keep his promise to David of an everlasting kingdom while also fulfilling Daniel’s vision of the everlasting dominion of the divine-like Son of Man?

Third, scattered throughout the prophetic writings are glimpses of how God still plans to keep his promise to David. God will “anoint” one of David’s descendants to bring restoration to Israel and perhaps the world. This mysterious, anointed figure is referred to as the “Messiah” or “Christ.”<sup>14</sup> We catch a glimpse of this figure in the psalms:

Why do the nations rant?  
 Why do the peoples rave uselessly?  
 The earth’s rulers take their stand;  
 the leaders scheme together against the LORD and  
 against his *anointed* one.<sup>15</sup>  
 “Come!” they say.  
 “We will tear off their ropes and throw off their chains!”  
 The one who rules in heaven laughs;  
 my Lord makes fun of them.

But then God speaks to them angrily;  
 then he terrifies them with his fury:  
 “I hereby appoint my king on Zion, my holy mountain!”

I will announce the LORD’s decision:  
 He said to me, “You are my son,  
 today I have become your father.  
 Just ask me,  
 and I will make the nations your possession;  
 the far corners of the earth your property.” (Ps. 2:1–8)

The anointed one, the Messiah, will be opposed, but God will vindicate him and establish his rule throughout the world. This may leave us asking, “How, if at all, is God’s promise of the Messiah related to Daniel’s vision of the divine-like Son of Man? And what will the messianic reign look like?”

Fourth, alongside these powerful figures—the Son of Man and the Messiah—we find the humble Suffering Servant. The prophet Isaiah paints a stirring picture of this individual, as he shares God’s message:

See, my servant will act wisely;  
 he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.  
 Just as there were many who were appalled at him—  
 his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being  
 and his form marred beyond human likeness. . . .

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
 He was despised and rejected by [humankind],  
 a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
 Like one from whom people hide their faces  
 he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain  
 and bore our suffering,  
 yet we considered him punished by God,  
 stricken by him, and afflicted.  
 But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
 he was crushed for our iniquities;  
 the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
 and by his wounds we are healed.  
 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
 each of us has turned to our own way;

and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. (Isa. 52:13–53:8 NIV)

Who is this mysterious figure? How, if at all, is he related to the Messiah and/or the Son of Man? And how will he bring deliverance if he is going to end up despised, oppressed, and wrongly condemned?

## Summary and Observations

We'll end this chapter with a brief summary and a few observations. First, the summary. God created a world that he declared “good,” and he made humans in his image to represent him and care for his creation. Humans sinned, and the corrosive power of sin made its presence known—physically, socially, and spiritually. God chooses Abraham and his descendants (the Israelites) so that they might be a blessing to the world. Abraham’s descendants eventually find themselves enslaved in Egypt. God intervenes, rescues Israel, and then enters into covenant with them. God gives the Israelites the law to shape them to be a people who love God and love others. Against God’s wishes, Israel appoints a king. After the checkered reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the kingdom divides into a northern and southern kingdom. Both kingdoms are eventually conquered by rival nations, resulting in the Israelites being exiled from the promised land. The Israelites eventually return from exile, but in a subdued fashion. Along the way, God has sent prophets who not only call Israel to faithfulness but also prophesy about a new covenant, a Son of Man, a Messiah, and a Suffering Servant.

Now a few closing observations. As a story, the Old Testament may strike the reader as incomplete. It almost begs for a “To Be Continued” notice at the end. There is so much left undone, so many questions unanswered. There’s the obvious question about those shadowy figures that the prophets foretold. But there’s also the sense in which the original plot is still left fairly open. How is God going to fix the large-scale brokenness that pervades the world?

Sure, God has made some progress in healing the *spiritual* brokenness—the marred relationship between humans and God. He’s entered into a covenant

with a group of people and given them instructions about how to be in relationship with him. Plus, he's provided a priestly and sacrificial system. But isn't this a far cry from the intimacy that Adam and Eve had in the presence of God? Is that intimacy lost for good? Consider the temple. It's a wonderful gift, the place where God is supposed to dwell most presently with his people. But access to the temple is so restrictive that it's a reminder not only of God's nearness but also of his distance. And what about the torah's sacrificial system? Can animal sacrifices restore the rift between God and humanity . . . or might they be foreshadowing a more significant sacrifice—one more appropriate for reconciling God and humans?

Or we might consider the *social* brokenness in the world. While God's law does indeed address the social brokenness in Israel, Israel's own history is a testament to how good laws are not enough to create good communities—oppression, theft, murder, adultery, and deception are still alive and well. It would seem that sin resides too deeply in the human heart for legislation alone to be the answer. And, as we're considering social brokenness, where do the Gentiles (non-Jews) fit into the picture? After all, aren't all humans God's creation, and aren't Abraham's descendants supposed to bless the world? So why does the Old Testament story focus almost exclusively on what God is doing with the people of Israel?

And what about the ongoing *physical* brokenness—suffering, war, and sickness? Plus, didn't we learn early in the biblical story that human death could have been avoided? Yet at this point death appears unavoidable, a taken-for-granted fact of life. Can this be remedied, or is death the final word, a disease caused by sin that God cannot or will not cure?

It's time now to turn to the next part of the Christian story, the life of Jesus, to see whether these issues find resolution, and if so, how.