

Unnatural Philosophy

Book 1 — Foundations

Arranged by Bryan Stearns

Forward

My dear child in the Lord,

I have been given the duty of guarding you in the faith and supporting your growth in Christ. You have many good people around you to lead you as a child of God: your parents, your pastor, and many good friends and relatives. Listen to your parents. Listen to your pastor. Most importantly, listen to Jesus Christ.

That's really all I'm writing to tell you. Listen to Christ. The rest of these pages are just more complicated ways of saying that. Any teaching or support I could pass on to you will always come down to that. But sometimes it helps, to show how the more complicated things we struggle with in our lives are actually very simple when you see what they really mean.

Some of what I am writing here for you won't seem very interesting when you first read it. Some of it might seem overly-complicated at the time. But there is a possibility that, one day, as you grow older, some of those complicated things might become more useful.

You see, I am not really writing these pages to teach you the same things that your pastor or parents will teach you. Well, I am—in that I know they'll be teaching you to listen to Christ too. You should trust them to teach you the main things you need to know. But the point of what I want to pass down to you here is some of the ways those main things fit into the nooks and crannies of daily life. I want to share with you the things that I myself hadn't learned when I was growing up, and which I wish I had.

As you grow in wisdom and stature, the world will continue to throw lots of weird and crooked things your way. Sometimes when that happens, you won't be prepared with an answer or response. When that happens, first go to your pastors, and your parents, and your brothers and sisters in Christ. But I pray these words help prepare you for some of it too.

But no matter what challenges you face, the answer is always: "Listen to Christ!"

Your affectionate sponsor,
Bryan

1 Knowledge of Good and Evil

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

“Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land.”

(Deuteronomy 30)

My dear child in the Lord,

What I'm sharing with you is knowledge that I have found from listening to Christ, as I have been able. But I am just a man. Anything I can share with you will be partial and prone to error. (That applies to this whole book.) So if you learn nothing else from me, learn this: where to get good knowledge, reliable knowledge, the true knowledge. Not from me. Get it directly from the source, from God's Word. God's Word does not have error. Listen to Christ.

What is knowledge? Let's get our knowledge about knowledge from God's Word too. Now, people have come up with lots of complicated ways of talking about knowledge. They may have good points to them. I don't care about those ways here though. What does the Bible say? Listen to God.

The Bible starts off in Genesis by talking about knowledge, with Adam and Eve in the garden, so knowledge must be important. Hopefully, you have been taught the history of Genesis already. Let's look through it again. Let's *know* it. Let's learn about knowledge of good and evil. It's something we often overlook.

"And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (Genesis 2)

God says that everything He made during those six days of creation was good. That includes the tree of life. That includes the tree of the knowledge of good and evil too. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1).

That includes Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve didn't know good and evil when they were created as perfect people in God's perfect garden. They only *knew* good. They knew life. When God declared them good, He also declared what the good work was that He made for them to do in His good creation.

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” (Genesis 2).

God gave them life and put them in a living garden, and He wanted them to be good gardeners within the garden, to grow with life and make it grow too. That was all good, very good.

And God, being good Himself, also gave them the choice to know evil too, if they wanted. Don't let anyone tell you that they didn't know what they were doing and couldn't have *known* not to eat from the tree. God told them! He let them know what evil looked like so they could avoid it. He told them that the choice between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the choice between life and death.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” (Genesis 2)

They knew all they needed to know, if they listened to God.

But Adam and Eve—ack! They didn't listen. The devil lied to Eve (before she was named Eve), saying, "You will not surely die," and "You will be like God knowing good and evil!" (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve knew good, but the devil convinced them to want to know evil too. That was not good!

A lie is false knowledge. The devil told Eve a lie. He gave her false knowledge, and she listened to him. She let that false knowledge fill her head. God had given her good knowledge, "You shall not eat," but she let the false knowledge replace God's Word in her head. Eve listened to the devil instead of God. Adam then listened to Eve instead of God too, and he also ate. They rejected God's Word.

Then they were ashamed, and they hid from God. They didn't want God to *know* they disobeyed Him! Then when God found them, they tried to hide their guilt and blame it on other people, as if they could confuse God.

"The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'" (Genesis 3)

But God knew. He *knows* everything. God did give the woman to the man, and the devil did deceive the woman, and the woman did give the fruit to the man. But the woman and the man both chose to listen to the devil's words, and they didn't listen to God's Word.

Because Adam and his wife chose to stuff their heads with forbidden knowledge instead of life, God took away the tree of life.

“Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.” (Genesis 3)

And you see the fundamental problem here for Adam and Eve? They didn’t want to take God’s Word for it when He said “You shall not eat.” They wanted to *know* for themselves. God gave them the choice between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil for themselves. They didn’t listen to God. They didn’t choose life—not until after the damage was done, anyway.

But still, God loved them. He promised that He would send a Savior through the woman’s offspring. “The Lord God said to the serpent, . . . ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel’” (Genesis 3). Jesus would come to separate mankind from the devil and from the death that comes from listening to him. He would bring life. Like Jesus said when He finally came, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10).

So God offered them life, even after they chose death. And God clothed Adam and Eve to cover the shame that they had tried to hide from God. “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” (Genesis 3)

Life comes from Christ, who was the promised offspring of Adam and Eve. Good knowledge comes from Christ—good knowledge for life, not knowledge for evil too. As John writes of Jesus,

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20)

So we’re back to that question. What is knowledge? What is good knowledge?

Knowing something means, very simply, that it’s in your head. It’s inside you. You fill your mind with it. It’s in your brain—part of your brain—and therefore part of your body. For example, if your mom asks you where you left your shoes and you tell her you don’t know, you are telling her that the knowledge of where your shoes are is not inside your body. (Still, your shoes were given to you to take care of, so you really ought to know where they are.) How do you get knowledge? You see something, or hear something, and the sight or the sound leave a mark inside you. Your memory of it is an imprint on your brain, inside your body. This sentence you are reading right now just left a mark in your brain. Try to forget it! Can you? (Actually, don’t forget it, please; then you’d just have to read it over again.)

But there are two ways knowledge can be inside you. First, you can know something because someone told it to you. In that case, your knowledge is something you receive from someone else. Second, you can know something by direct experience.

For example, I might tell your mom that your shoes are out back in the shed, but that we shouldn't go look for them now because it's raining and we'd get wet. She might not see that your shoes are there, but she can trust me when I tell her. So she knows because she listens to me. Alternatively, your mom might not listen to me, and decide she wants to see for herself. So she wanders outside in the rain and sees your shoes with her own eyes. In that case, rather than know about your shoes by letting my words leave a mark inside her, she got knowledge about your shoes by having the sight of your shoes leave a mark inside her.

In other words, a person can know something either by faith or by sight.

Now, if your mom did go outside to check your shoes for herself, she'd get wet. If she had listened to me, she could have stayed dry. But in this example, she chose to know by sight instead of by faith, and so she got wet.

Adam and Eve were presented with the choice to know what good and evil were either by faith or by sight. In the beginning, Adam and Eve knew only good things. They knew only God's Word. And God's Word told them what evil looked like. They could know about evil by faith, by having God's Word inside them. But in order for them to know evil by sight and not by faith, they'd have to let that evil directly inside themselves. Why would anyone want to do that? Why would your mom want to get wet just to know something I had just told her? Only because she didn't trust me.

Why would Adam and Eve not trust God? The devil tempted Eve to experience what evil looked like for herself. The devil told her to doubt God's Word. He encouraged her to know by sight rather than by faith. He convinced her

to let evil leave a mark inside her directly in the place of God's good Word.

And Eve listened to the devil. The devil's words reached her ears, and she listened to them. She willingly let his words override God's Word inside her. By eating of the tree, she put her faith in the devil's words. She could have chosen to reject the devil's words and cling to God's Word that she already had. But she did not. She ate. *Chomp*. When Adam and Eve chose to *know* evil by disobeying God and by experiencing evil for themselves, they chose to mix evil knowledge in with the good knowledge that God had given them. So Adam and Eve got what they wanted, knowledge of good—and evil. And their children also became tainted with the knowledge of evil. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Galatians 5).

So you see why it is important to know things by faith. There are lots of things you can put inside your body. But not all of them are good. Listen to Christ, and by believing, have life in His name.

Now, look again at what happened with Adam and Eve. First, God created the garden and the trees and Adam and Eve. And God told them to be fruitful and multiply, and to eat of the good trees in the garden, including the tree of life. And He told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, because then they would die. (And you can't really be fruitful when you're dead.) But Adam and his wife chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil anyway instead of the tree of life. Then God promised that their Savior from death would come from the woman's offspring. And then, Adam named the woman Eve, which means *Life*. Then Adam and Eve did come together to be fruitful and multiply like God first told them

to, and God says, “Adam knew Eve his wife” (Genesis 4).

You see that there are competing types of knowledge here. There is life and good, and there is death and evil.

Adam filled his head and heart with Eve, as God had intended. Being fruitful and multiplying with your spouse as God commanded is something that fills both your mind and body with knowledge of your spouse. And that is good. This is what good husbands and wives do for each other. They know all they can about each other, and they concern their thoughts and actions with each other so that they can serve and love each other. That’s their job.

Even while you aren’t married and don’t know another person as closely as husband and wife do, you still have jobs too. And you need to know things to do your jobs. You have a family God has given you to love. You should still fill your mind every day with whatever you need to be a good member of your family. Listen to your parents, care for your grandparents, learn how to help out around the house, and so on. Fill your body with whatever knowledge you need to be a good friend to your friends too, and to be a good caretaker of your pets, and to be a good steward of your shoes. (Where are they. . . ?)

And as God’s people, we are all to fill ourselves and our minds first and foremost with God and His Word. Listen to Christ. That’s how you know good. That’s how you have life.

You’re not missing out by knowing good instead of evil. You can only ever fit so much knowledge in your body, and there is always more good that you can know. There is more good out there than you can ever fully know. “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge

of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11). You never have to put curiosity to rest.

God knows the difference between good and evil. Trust Jesus to tell you what good and evil are so that you don't have to experience evil directly inside yourself. Jesus is the only way you learn the true good. Everything else on this earth is tainted with evil. Trust Him. Love His Word. Fill yourself with Him.

Listen to Him.

“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

(Romans 10)

2 True Good

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22)

My dear child in the Lord,

Many times during your life, your parents will have told you to be good. Do you remember when the last time was? It probably won't be the last time. And like we talked about in the previous chapter, our Father in heaven also tells us to be good, and tells us to listen to Jesus to learn our knowledge of good.

But what does it mean to be good?

Another way to answer that question is to ask, who is good? “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10). God is good. Only God is good. That should tell us something. If we want to know what goodness looks like, we look at God.

God is the creator of everything. He created the world. He created you. He created Adam and Eve. He created the garden of Eden. He created the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He even created Lucifer. Everything God made was very good.

But Lucifer rejected God's will, and became Satan, the devil. He chose to oppose God and try to take you from Him. Satan calls good what God calls evil, and calls evil what God calls good. "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8).

So if God is good, and if the devil opposes God, the devil cannot be good. The devil might think he is right in his own eyes. He might say that actually he is good and that God is not. But that is silly, and that is also very sad, and that is wrong.

It's not just a matter of competing opinions. You might say, "Well, God thinks one thing is good and the devil thinks another thing is good. Who's to say one of them is more correct than the other?" It's not just a matter of opinion. It's a matter of definitions. It's a matter of who has the authority to define what is good. God is the highest authority in all creation. He created everything. He knows how everything works.

Have you ever invented an imaginary world or made your own imaginary story that you told to your friends or your parents? I do this all the time. I did this while I grew up, and I still do it. Imagination and creativity are wonderful gifts of God.

Let's say that you invented a story about a man named Terquid, who had a flying car. And this was a special car, which had all sorts of secret gadgets and gizmos and could do all sorts of things. A very cool car. And Terquid went on all sorts of adventures with this car. And then let's say you told the story of mighty Terquid and his flying car to a

friend of yours, and your friend said, “No, the car didn’t fly, and it couldn’t drive either. The car could only tumble down hills.” Or maybe your friend said, “No, the big red button didn’t shoot a missile, it made the car explode!” Your friend would have a lot of nerve to say that. It wasn’t his story. It wasn’t his world. How could he say what did or didn’t happen in the world? How could he claim to know what the big red button did or didn’t do? The only way he knew about the world in the first place was because you told it to him.

In this example, your friend was trying to take over authority over your world. You had true authority over it, but your friend wanted to usurp your authority. Your friend wanted to be a higher authority over *you* in this imaginary world.

This is what Satan tries to do when he says that what God says is good is actually not good. God created the universe. He knows how it works. He is the only highest authority over it. If your standard of good and evil is different from God’s, it shows that you are opposed to God. It shows that you are trying to be a higher authority over God. Satan does try to make himself a higher authority than God by telling God He’s wrong. Satan tries to make himself God and to make God his subject. He doesn’t even try to hide it. Do you remember how he tried to tell Jesus to worship him?

“The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”’ Then the devil left him.” (Matthew 4)

No one can tell God what is good or what is evil. If you tried to tell God that something He did was evil or that He needs to do something differently to be good, you'd be telling Him he needs to fall down and worship you too. Peter found himself carelessly doing this once.

“Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” (Matthew 16)

So no one can tell God what is good or what is evil. God does what He pleases. Anything that opposes His will is evil and is doing what Satan does. God is good. “No one is good except God alone.”

So God not only gets to define good, He *is* the definition of good itself! No one else has authority over God to define anything else or to tell Him a different standard of true good. That means *true* good is what God wants. True good is that which aligns with His will. And so the definition of *true* evil is that which God opposes and that which opposes God. And God does oppose evil. “The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth” (Psalm 34).

People who don't know God will say we each get to define our own true good. They'll say that no one has the

authority to tell you whether your knowledge is good or evil or true or false (but ironically, they'll still tell you that what they tell you is true and good). They'll say that, for lots of things, true good is up to your own interpretation. "You can be like God, knowing good and evil. You can be like God, *defining* good and evil."

Those people want to make themselves gods too. Some of them know about God and just don't want Him to be an authority over them. Or some of those people just don't know God is there. They think there is no one to define truth, so they have to do it themselves. These people are alone and lonely, trying to be God by themselves, even though it's too much for them. Deep down, most of these people I've met tend to be pretty angry about life.

We're not strong enough or smart enough to define truth for ourselves. The One who created the world is the One who knows what is true about it and what isn't. He's the one who *knows* what is good in it and what is not good. Because He created the world. Of course He knows! He designed it. So listen to Him, and you'll learn what is true good too.

"Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." (Psalm 34)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1)

In other words, acknowledge that God is bigger and smarter than you. Let Him teach you what is good. Be like Him by following Him, not by usurping Him.

Now, about that example earlier of Terquid and his mighty flying car: another thing to remember is that it is okay for us to share storytelling. We aren't God, and when we tell stories, it's often really great to share the storytelling and world-building with friends. It can be lots of fun, and the imaginary world can become much grander and more alive because you share it, and it can have things that we never could have thought of on our own. We aren't always the best storytellers when we're alone. But if you make the imaginary world, that's still up to you whether you want to do that.

But God knows everything. God is infinite and all-powerful. There is no one who could make a better world than He can, and there is no one who creates a better story than He does. There's no one who could care for us better than He can, even though we aren't perfectly good ourselves and often mess things up. He is still good, and He still takes care of us.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also

predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8)

So be conformed to Christ, the Son of God. Listen to Him.

“You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord,
according to your word.

Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
for I believe in your commandments.

Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.

You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.

The insolent smear me with lies,
but with my whole heart I keep your precepts;
their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law.

It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.

The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.”

(Psalm 119, Teth)

3 The Problem of Evil

"Then Job answered and said: 'Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy on account of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

'Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food. But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind. Therefore I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him.'"
(Job 23)

My dear child in the Lord,

There is a lot of pain and suffering in this world. The older you get, the more of it you will see. You have probably experienced a lot of pain in your life at different times already. At the very least, I'm sure you have stubbed your toe at least once. Maybe you've had a toothache, or had a tooth fall out. Maybe you've stepped on a staple in the carpet. Maybe you've even touched a pan on the stove or a casserole dish in the oven that was way too hot and burned your hand.

There is also a lot of death in this world. The older you get, the more of it you will see. You might have had close relatives die already. You might have attended their funerals. Maybe you've seen pets die, or found dead animals in your yard outside.

Understandably, a lot of people are very upset by this whole pain and death business. We are often afraid of pain. We're often afraid of our own deaths. We like comfort and pleasure. We like our lives. And to make matters worse, when someone dies it also hurts the people left behind. And we don't like pain. We are not supposed to like pain. It's not a good thing, nor is it a pleasant thing. It hurts. Death hurts too. Death is not good.

But there are a lot of people in this world who want to blame God for pain and death. They call pain and death evil, and then they say that God is responsible. Their complaints usually sound like one of these two statements:

1: We don't like pain. God could prevent our pain.
Therefore, pain is God's fault.

2: We don't like death. God could prevent our death.
Therefore, death is God's fault.

And then they'll go even further and say that since pain is evil or death is evil, God must therefore be evil.

Sometimes they say it in more sophisticated terms, like, "An all-powerful and all-knowing God could know how to prevent pain from coming into existence, and would be able to do it." And then they will go on to say something like, "A good God would want to prevent pain or death, because pain and death are evil. Since God didn't prevent those things, a good God must not exist." People pompously call this contradiction they've constructed "The Problem of Evil" (with fancy capital letters and everything).

But no matter how sophisticated people make it sound, what they're really saying is simply that pain and death are God's fault. They're saying that, because God created the world, and because there is pain and death in the world He created, pain and death must be God's fault. They want to blame God for their problems. There are many different versions of the Problem of Evil, because we like to complain a lot, but they all basically come down to the same complaint.

It is good that we are upset about evil. We're not supposed to like it. But it's not good that we blame God for our evil.

God is good. God doesn't like us to be in pain. In the resurrection, "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21). And God doesn't like us to die. "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 18).

But see that Ezekiel quote? It's important that when we quote God's Word, we don't just pick and choose the bits we like. We should listen to all of it, because when we only read small bits out of context, we're not really listening to what God is trying to tell us. The surrounding sentences read like this:

"Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." (Ezekiel 18)

And there are more words in Ezekiel too, which you should go read for even more context. (You can always tell when a quote begins with "Yet" or "Therefore" that there's more behind the quote.)

So what's God saying? Yes, there is evil and suffering and death in the world, and God doesn't like it. And what?!! It's our fault! So stop being evil. Stop opposing God. Turn to God already, and live!!

We don't like admitting that things are our fault, so we come up with all these clever arguments about how it's actually God's fault. Adam did this right at the start in the garden. "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3).

Because clearly God does allow us to be in pain, and to die. Look at what happened to Job.

“And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.’ And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.’” (Job 1)

And then Satan went out and took Job’s property and killed his children! And you’ll recall that later on God allowed Satan to put Job in a lot of physical pain too and give him sores all over his body.

God did not do these things to Job. But He did allow Satan to do these things. Does that mean that we can call God evil?

There is one very easy response to the complaints of the Problem of Evil: simply remember what true good actually is, and what evil is. If you say that God’s way of doing things isn’t good, then you are trying to define good for yourself and then hold God accountable to your definition of good. You call God evil because He doesn’t measure up to your standard of good. Look out! Then you find yourself guilty of trying to set yourself up as a higher authority over God, just like Peter did when Jesus then rebuked him and called him “Satan.” Even if you’re only starting from the

knowledge that God is the highest authority, by definition, and know nothing else about God, then you already know that you don't actually have the authority to define what is truly good.

So we know that there is no way we can logically say that what God does is not good. He is smarter and bigger than we are. And when we tell God that He is not good, we actually find ourselves opposing God, and therefore we find ourselves guilty of evil. The belief that we know good and evil better than God is itself the *real problem of evil*.

This is what God pointed out to Job in response to his complaints:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! . . . Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it. . . . Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?” (Job 38-40)

In other words, “Who are you to tell me how to do things? Where were you when I made the universe? If you're so big and smart, how does the world work? Tell me! Surely you know! If you're as powerful and smart as the creator of the universe that you can tell me what is good and what is not, tell me, if you can!”

And then Job listened to God, and repented. He turned, and lived.

“Then Job answered the Lord and said: ‘I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . Therefore I have uttered what I

did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42)

And then God praised Job’s faithfulness and had Job intercede for his friends who had spoken badly of God, and God forgave Job’s friends and restored Job’s fortunes.

Job didn’t understand why all the bad things had happened to him. And we know the bad things weren’t because God was punishing him for some specific sin he did. His pain was because of things Job just didn’t understand at the time. But Job listened to God even though he didn’t understand.

Now, be careful about using this argument with other people. It is a very direct argument, and it cuts to the heart of the problem. And people who complain about evil are usually in pain, and when we’re in pain we usually aren’t willing to hear rational arguments about how we’re not God or how we’re wrong in our ideas of what good or evil are (not from someone who isn’t God anyway). So this isn’t usually a very productive thing to say to someone who has just begun grieving about something. Be considerate for other people when talking with them, hear their complaints, and try to see what it is each person actually needs to hear. Then if it is your job to speak, give each person true comfort and truth as you can from there, based on what they are actually thinking and feeling.

Now back to the main “problem.” If God’s will is always good, and God allows us to suffer, does that mean that allowing us to suffer is good?

There is another important thing to understand about the problem of evil. Remember I said above that there are two main ways that people complain: in response to pain, and in response to death. Those two often go together, but they are actually distinct complaints. Pain is not the same as death.

Death is the absence of life. Where does life come from? It comes from God. Therefore, death is separation from God, who provides life.

But pain is just information. Usually pain is information about death, maybe about the possibility of death (which is a good reason to not like pain). When you feel pain in your tooth, it might be information your body is giving you to let you know your tooth is dying. Or when you feel pain in your foot from stepping on a staple in the carpet, that's your body warning you that death can happen when you get stabbed by sharp pointy objects. Your whole body might stay alive after you step on a staple, but the cells in your foot do die when the staple pierces them. If you didn't feel pain, you'd never know there was a sharp pointy object there attacking your foot. But because you feel the pain you are able to respond and save your foot from further destruction.

What would life be like if you couldn't feel pain? You'd step on all sorts of things and never think it was a big deal. You'd run barefoot on sharp rocks and shards of glass and think about how nice it is to be able to run outside without ever needing to put shoes on. But then one day you'd look down and notice your foot wasn't working anymore because of all the ways you injured it. (Hm, now where did you leave your shoes. . .?) You'd also probably not care much about picking up a hot casserole straight out of the oven. You might even enjoy the savory smell of your hand getting cooked on the glass, at least until you noticed that

your hand was scarred and crispy and also not working well anymore.

Pain hurts. In one sense, pain is not a good thing, because it shows us that death is crouching at the door, and death is not a good thing. But in another sense, pain really is a good thing, because it warns us where death is, so we can avoid it. Pain is a reminder to us to “turn, and live.”

But we still ask ourselves, “How could a good God allow so much suffering?”

We just don’t like pain, so we want it to go away. There is suffering in this world, and we hate it. We forget that the pain is just a symptom of death, not death itself. Our pain is letting us know that there’s a problem.

The problem is evil.

You remember, God is the definition of true good. Quite simply, this means that anything that opposes God or opposes what He calls good must be true evil. The problem is that we oppose God. We rebel against him whenever we don’t listen to what He tells us in His Word. By opposing God, we separate ourselves from God. God is our source of life. What happens when we separate ourselves from our source of life? We die.

Pain is the symptom of death. Death is the symptom of evil.

Evil is separation from God. Evil is like cutting a branch from a good vine or tree. You’ve seen how a branch sticks out of a vine. The branch is alive because it is attached to the vine. What happens if you pull a branch off? Does it die? Well, the leaves on the branch might still look pretty green. That means the cells inside the leaves must still be

alive, right? So it looks okay. But no real life is pumping through it on the inside. Sooner or later, the death will become visible, and the leaves will turn brown and crumble away. The same goes for your foot too, by the way. If you cut off your foot (please don't try this), then your foot would still be warm and soft for a little while, and on the outside someone might say it looks and feels the same as it did while it was attached to you. But your foot would still basically be dead. No more life would be pumping through it. It would be separated from the veins that bring life through your blood to all the little cells in your foot. ("For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17).) The moment you cut off your foot, your foot will surely die.

God had said to Adam, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2). This was how God taught Adam what good and evil were, and what life and death were. If Adam chose to eat from the forbidden tree, it would be deliberately disobeying God. It would be a choice to reject what God had said was good for him to do. So it would be an act of opposing God, and Adam would be rebelling against his source of life. Rebelling against your source of life must lead to death. Even if God's command hadn't involved a tree, the day Adam chose to rebel against God, that was the day Adam separated himself from the life that flows from God. That was the day death came to Adam, and to all who got their life from Adam, including his children. That surely was the day he died. He looked like he was still alive for a little while. But like a leaf that you pluck from a vine, he only looked alive because of residual life in him. God told him that, sooner or later, his death would become visible, and he would lose his color and crumble away. "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3).

Adam's death, and all our deaths, are our own fault. It's what we get from rebelling against God's life.

And yes, it was God who pronounced the curse to Adam. God is the one who instituted and defined this arrangement. He is a good God and the source of true life, and He is also the ruler of the cosmos, the highest authority who makes the world run justly, the way it's supposed to. God didn't just say, "I curse you." He said to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Genesis 3). These were the natural consequences of their actions. They brought it on themselves. But God defined and enforced those consequences.

And we know that our good God does punish evil too.

Have you ever seen a spoiled child, a child whose parents never punish him no matter how nasty he gets? Even when he is extremely rude to his parents and yelling at them, they just ignore him as if nothing happened—or they just give him whatever he wants to make him stop yelling? We know that this is wrong. Or what if there was a man who went around murdering people? Should that man be punished? We know he should. We also know that Adam and Eve had a son named Cain, who went and murdered his brother Abel. (He might have used a hammer.) And God punished Cain.

"And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.'” (Genesis 4)

What if God had said, “Nah, that’s okay. That’s a pity about Abel, but Adam has lots more children to spare. You messed up, Mr. Murderer, but we’ll not make a big deal about it. Just don’t do it again okay? Here, have a cookie.” God would be saying that what Cain did was okay. That would be an insult and more hurt to everyone who mourned for Abel’s death! That would be an insult to Abel! And God would be telling their family that their hurt didn’t matter. That really would be evil. That would not be loving toward Abel or his family.

God is not like that. God is not evil. So God does punish evil. He is patient, and He loves us, but He is also just. Because He is good, and because He loves us, and because He loves the people we hurt when we’re evil, there needs to be punishment for our evil.

“Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every human heart will melt. They will be dismayed: pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at one another; their faces will be aflame. . . . I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity.” (Isaiah 13)

That’s the pain we feel. That’s the death we feel. We don’t like it. We’re not supposed to like it. We’re supposed to notice the consequences of our evil, and turn back to God, and live. God lets us choose to oppose Him if we want. That’s part of the good world that He made. But He doesn’t

like it when we do. God doesn't like evil, and God doesn't like it when we're in pain either. But a good God must punish evil.

“Because you have said, ‘We have made a covenant with death, . . . for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter’; therefore thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’ And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.’ Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overwhelming scourge passes through, you will be beaten down by it. . . . For the Lord will rise up [to] do his deed—strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien is his work! Now therefore do not scoff, lest your bonds be made strong; for I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech. Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? . . . Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever; when he drives his cart wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it. This also comes from the Lord of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.” (Isaiah 28)

Pain and death are the punishments God has ordained for our evil. But God calls it His “alien” work; it’s not what He likes to do. But it’s what He needs to do as a good God in response to our evil. And one of the reasons He does it is

to lead us to see our evil so that we do “turn, and live.” He does not want to thresh us forever. We should receive our life from Him and not try to hide from His truth with our lies and complaints. We should turn to Him and receive the wonderful counsel and excellent wisdom that He offers us.

We should listen to Him.

But we can't solve the problem of evil that way. We are born dead. We are born separated from God and in need of His life. A dead thing can't listen. A dead thing can't bring itself back to life so that it can listen either. If you cut off your foot, it can't jump back onto your leg on its own. And neither can we. We are dead. We can't even “turn, and live” on our own while we're dead.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2)

So what's the point of being created in the first place then, if we're just born evil and doomed to die?

But God did fix our death for us. The picture is bigger. That quote from Ephesians continues:

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised

us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2)

It's just like Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37; it's a longer passage, but you should go look it up again on your own.) Bones can't bring themselves to life. God breathes His Spirit of life into them. God uses His spoken Word to deliver that life.

God brings life to you by putting His Word in your ears and in your heart. He puts His Word in your body. The Word creates faith in you, and that joins you to God's life.

“. . . if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' . . . For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10)

This is good news for us! God isn't afraid of death. God is the source and author of life. God doesn't avoid death. He doesn't ignore evil and the death and pain the result from

it. No, God confronts evil, and He conquers death. God is just, and our evil requires the death penalty. So God sent His Son to die our death for us. That was part of the plan. God knew we would kill Him, just like Cain killed Abel. But God made His Son to die in our place. And since God is also the source of Life, God didn't stay dead.

"The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses." (Acts 3)

"For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." (Romans 3)

Jesus' blood is a propitiation, a thing that satisfies God's justice and wrath against our evil. And Jesus is our source of life by which we are saved. Jesus is the one we look to for our eternal life. Any people who separate themselves from Jesus choose evil and separate themselves from God.

God isn't afraid of death. Jesus died. We still suffer pain and death in this world. This world is still evil. Jesus didn't make the evil of this world disappear. Adam and Eve and their children (you and me) still have evil inside them. That evil needs to die. And it does die. And it will continue to die.

Jesus took God's wrath in our place. That doesn't mean that He keeps this world from facing Adam and Eve's curse. It means He connects us to Himself so that we can follow Him through this world's death into His life on the other side.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23)

Jesus doesn't lead us away from the valley of the shadow of death. He leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, even with all its dry bones, out to the other side, where we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Romans 6)

By dying, God conquered death for us. God let the devil attack His foot. God stepped on death, and let it pierce

Him. It hurt Him. It scarred Him. But by stepping on death, Jesus conquered death. By stepping on the devil's head, Jesus crushed him and saved us from the devil and the evil and death that he throws at us. And Jesus' foot did die. But it didn't die forever, because Jesus is God, the Author of life. Jesus couldn't stay truly disconnected from life the way your foot stays disconnected from you if you cut it off.

And so God gives us life by connecting us to Jesus. Like a leaf being grafted back into a good vine.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." (John 15)

As people who have been attached to Jesus and will rise from death with Him, we can laugh in the face of pain and death here in what remains of this earth. Now, death is terrible and nothing to laugh at. When faced with the wrongness of the death of His friend Lazarus, "Jesus wept" (John 11). But we can see death in this world as evil passing away, even the evil that's in our own bodies. We have hope in the new life and new, pure bodies that will come after we die. We know that in the resurrection there will be no more evil in our bodies and no more devil to tempt us with it.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5)

Because we are evil and God is good, we do experience pain and suffering and death. These are the symptoms. They let us know that we are dead and we need life. If we didn't feel pain, we wouldn't keep ourselves from stepping on the carpet staples of death. And if we didn't see death, we probably wouldn't recognize the evil of separating ourselves from God either. We wouldn't “turn, and live,” like He calls us to. We would keep separating ourselves from Him.

But God does call us to turn to Him and live. And God's Word has power and authority. Jesus' Word is the power that raises people from the dead. After “Jesus wept,” “He cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The man who had died came out” (John 11). And Jesus will raise you from death too.

“So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that

you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.'" (John 5)

So what does it mean to have done good, so that we will be called to the resurrection of life? As Jesus said in this passage, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life." The problem of evil is that we don't believe. We don't listen to God. But the free gift of eternal life belongs to all those who hear God's Word and believe Him.

So listen to Him.

“No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” (John 3)

4 True Discipline

“But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down before your enemies. Those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when none pursues you. And if in spite of this you will not listen to me, then I will discipline you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power, and I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit. . . . But if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in fury, and I myself will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.

“But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, . . . then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.” (Leviticus 27)

My dear child in the Lord,

There is a lot of pain and suffering in this world. The older you get, the more of it you will see. You have probably experienced a lot of pain already in your life at different times already.

Your parents don't want you to be in pain. They love you, and want you to be happy and healthy. But because they love you, they also know that what's best for you in the long term sometimes involves pain in the short term. Sometimes they discipline you. "A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke. . . . Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him" (Proverbs 13).

It is painful when your parents discipline you. Why do they do that? How does that save you from even worse pain later? How is that love?

Pain is a symptom of death, and death a symptom of evil. Is discipline a symptom of death too? But isn't discipline good?

People are sinful. We are naturally selfish. I'm selfish, and so are you. One time, when I was very small, I hit my sister on the head with a toy hammer. Do not do this. That is not how brothers and sisters should love each other. At the time, I thought I wasn't hitting her very hard. And I thought that, since it was just a plastic toy hammer, it wouldn't actually hurt. I was pretending to be like the characters in cartoons that pull out giant wooden hammers and squish people with them and make birds fly around their heads. And birds are nice, right? Anyway, my own head is hard. I knew it wouldn't feel that bad to me if I was hit on the head

with that toy hammer as lightly as I thought I was hitting my sister. But to my surprise, she cried out in pain! Our mom disciplined me for that. I was put in time-out, and the hammer was taken away for a while. I didn't think that was fair. I thought my sister was overreacting and trying to get attention. But still, I was being selfish. I wanted to hit my sister on the head because I thought it was funny and because I wanted to see birds. I wanted to please myself, and I didn't really think that much about how it might hurt my sister. So my mom disciplined me. I'm glad she did. Even if I didn't agree with it at the time, it helped teach me that people aren't supposed to hit each other with hammers. My mom's discipline helped to bridle my selfishness so that I would get along better with other people in the long term. Imagine if no one ever disciplined me for hitting people with toy hammers when I was small. What would happen if, when I was a grown-up, I hit someone on the head with a real hammer? I'm very glad my mom disciplined me when I was growing up.

What if my parents didn't discipline me when I was growing up? Not just about hammers, but with my natural selfishness in general? What if all my little selfish desires were never bridled? What if I always stuffed myself with candy, shoved ahead of people to be first in line, yelled at people when I didn't get my way, or bossed and pushed other kids around to make them do what I want instead of trying to serve them and love them like I should? Then my selfishness would truly be unbridled.

Can you imagine a wild, unbridled horse charging through a cafeteria? Maybe the horse wants the food, or maybe it just wants to romp around and explore. Either way, the horse doesn't really care about the mess it is making or about the people it might be hurting. The horse hurts the people in the cafeteria when it pushes them over trying to get to the food. The horse destroys good plates and

machines and food when it tramples on them to try to explore the supply closet in the back. And it hurts itself too when it bumps and scrapes itself on things as it wildly charges through the complicated space. People in the cafeteria might cry out to the horse or try to restrain it, but it doesn't care that it's hurting them. It probably doesn't even notice. Or it might even be afraid of the people, afraid of their hands that reach toward it and try to restrain it and its wild dancing upon the tables. That wild, unbridled horse is very selfish.

Selfish people don't get along well with other people. By definition, to be selfish is to be focused on serving yourself. And to be focused on serving yourself means you don't pay much attention to what might be best for other people. You probably have met some selfish, spoiled kids who don't listen to their parents and don't often share with other kids. They might charge through someone else's house, knocking over furniture and breaking things. Or they might grab another kid's toy and run off with it, not noticing how they made that kid very sad. They just don't think about how their actions might hurt other people, like the way I didn't think about how my plastic hammer would hurt my sister. These kids might not always act totally selfish. They might have good moments where they do share with other kids and where they are loving toward their parents. But often, they still let their selfishness run wild. Whenever a person's inner selfish cafeteria horse gets his speed up, no one else gets to play along.

Everyone has a bit of the selfish cafeteria horse in them. I do. You do too.

And being selfish is lonely. When you are focused on yourself, you push other people away. You want to push other people away. They might try to reach out to you as

loving friends, but you won't want to reach back to them. And that makes them sad.

The cafeteria horse is a very active kind of selfishness. It's a selfishness that actively pushes down other people. There's another kind of selfishness that we all have too, though, a passive kind that might not actively hurt other people, but which doesn't care about helping them either. Even if you don't trample over your friends like a cafeteria horse when they reach out to you, but you just sit there selfishly receiving their attention without wanting to reach back, that is selfish. And that is lonely too. It pushes them away, unless they're very stubborn in being friends with you.

Think of a small boy who just sits in a chair in a corner staring at the wall all day. Maybe you try to talk to him. You ask him, "How are you?" And he says, "Good." He doesn't say anything more or ask how you're doing. You try to hug him, and you think he's glad for the hug, but he doesn't say anything or hug you back. You might ask him to play a game with you, but he doesn't respond to that either. You might invite him to a party, but he says he's too busy and continues to sit in his chair. Unless you're very stubborn, you're probably going to give up trying to do anything with him after a while. He actually probably really appreciates that you were doing all these things for him and doesn't want you to stop. He knows he's lonely. (And his selfishness is also happy to receive attention.) But he doesn't really care enough to get himself out of his chair either. This isn't just a boy who needs to rest. Jesus would often go to a secluded spot to rest and pray. This is a sad boy who never leaves his corner enough to even need that kind of rest.

It's hard to imagine an unbridled cafeteria horse and the small, sad boy in the corner chair as being the same

person. You usually won't see one single person who acts like both of those together. But those behaviors are just different outsides for the same inside. The cafeteria horse runs wild because it selfishly wants to charge through things and doesn't care about doing bad things to other people. The sad boy in the corner chair sits still like a chunky potato because he selfishly doesn't care about doing good things with or for other people. Both of them don't care about other people. Both of them are selfish.

Without discipline, we like to be selfish. We choose to be lonely. And once we've pushed everyone else away and gotten the loneliness we wanted, doing things our own way, then we also find ourselves very sad. We don't like being lonely. God even said right in the start of creation, "It is not good that man should be alone." (Genesis 2) He was talking about marriage, but also about people in general. We need support from other people. We don't like to be alone. And our selfishness likes to receive attention from other people too. But our selfishness also doesn't like to play with other people. When we're selfish, we feel like other people are a burden or obstacle instead of a blessing. So our selfishness wants us to be alone too. It's a contradiction. We can't both be alone and not alone. And that means that selfish people are very unhappy no matter what they do.

Your parents stubbornly love you, and want to save you from the unhappiness that follows selfishness. So they discipline you when you act selfishly. They want you to grow up to be someone who isn't ruled by selfishness.

And they discipline you in two kinds of ways. The kind we usually think about is the negative kind, where they put you in a time-out or spank you or don't let you do the things you want to do. That's the kind of discipline you give to bridle a wild cafeteria horse (or a boy with a plastic

hammer). But they also give you a positive kind of discipline to train you to do nice things for other people and pull you out of your corner chair. They have you do chores around the house. They teach you to say please and thank you. They take you to activities and parties so you learn new skills and get better at interacting with people there. (And also because activities and parties are great!) And they try to give you good examples to follow by acting lovingly themselves as best they can. It's like how a coach trains an athlete to be faster and stronger at playing his sport. We say an athlete who regularly exercises and keeps himself fit and strong has "discipline." Your parents coach you to be better at helping other people, and give you that kind of discipline too. Your parents aren't perfect, but God gave them to you to teach you as best as they can.

So is discipline good or bad? Is pain from discipline good or bad?

You see, discipline is like a law. One of its uses is to act as a barrier, a curb, to keep you from death. It can keep you from misusing hammers. It can keep you from stepping on carpet staples. But when you break the law, discipline hurts you. You feel the pain.

So the discipline is good, but you are a sinner, and that's not good. When you are presented with the positive kind of discipline, the kind where your parents show you how you ought to live to be free from pain and have joy in the love of God, your sin doesn't like that. Your parents tell you, "Love your sister and take care of her." Your sin wakes up and says, "No! I won't!" And so you fight the good discipline, and you hit your sister on the head with a hammer. And so you then feel the painful, negative kind of discipline.

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” (Romans 7)

Discipline is good. Like a law, it acts as a curb to keep you from sin. Like a law, its presence reminds you that you do fail and need forgiveness. And also like a law, it acts as a guide to show you the positive way your Father wants you to live.

God disciplines us too. He doesn't want us to selfishly separate ourselves from Him, and He doesn't want us to selfishly separate ourselves from each other either. He gives us His law to show us how to live as His children so that we are saved from pain in the long run. He shows us how to live, not only to show us that we are sinful and need Him to save us but also to show us what we should strive for in this life.

Your parents discipline you in both the positive and negative ways because you are their child and they love you. Does your ability to do well at the positive disciplines they set before you change whether or not you are their child? Do you earn the right to be their child by doing your chores? Of course not! That would be silly. It's the other

way around: you do your chores because you are their child. You follow their discipline because you are their child. They will still be your parents even if you mess up in that, but they do want you to always get better and to succeed.

We also cannot earn our way into God's family by keeping His law or by following His discipline. That would be silly! It's also the other way around. We try to follow God and His ways because He is our God and Father and we are His children by baptism into Christ Jesus.

Some Christians will say that, since we cannot earn our way into God's family by keeping the law, the only point of God's law is to show us that we can't keep it perfectly and need Jesus. And then they will say that this means we don't need to worry too much about listening to God's commands, since all the benefits we get from God are a gift by grace through faith. But God does discipline us. He disciplines us because He loves us, and because we are His children. He gives you Christ Jesus not only to pay the price of your sins and earn your way into His family for you, but also for Him to be your example for positive discipline as a son of God. Because you have faith in Christ and are God's child through Him you do listen to His commands.

"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?"

'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed." (Hebrews 12)

If you weren't grafted into Jesus by baptism into His death, God's law would just mean real death for you. God's discipline against evil would just mean pain and suffering for you. Without Jesus paying the price of sin for you, you would still be separated from God's family.

But you are grafted into Jesus. And that means God's judgment towards you changes. Now His law isn't a source of pain and death for you. God doesn't look at you and see evil that needs to be destroyed. God looks at you and sees His Son Jesus. That frees you to live in love without fear.

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. . . . Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3)

God's law is a good discipline that trains you to live well with the life He gives you. You are alive now because of Jesus. Even if you fail to keep God's law perfectly, you are still bound to Christ and saved in Him. So don't act like you are still dead. Don't act like someone who is still evil and opposing God and separated from His life. Act like someone who has life.

Act like someone who listens to Christ.

“Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’

“So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’ Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” (Hebrews 13)

5 True Faith

“God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’ . . . Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’

“And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.’”
(Genesis 22)

My dear child in the Lord,

The title of this chapter is very bold. What is true faith? That's a very deep question, and there are many ways of talking about it. Faith is intimately central to our identities as Christians, and we will never stop finding more things to say about it. I will never fully understand all the proper ways of talking about faith or all the ways Christ shapes our lives through faith—there's just too much. It is a wonderful, beautiful thing, and I'm a small, finite human being, and a layman at that. But at the same time, I must talk about it, as we all must, because it is so central to us. Christ is central to us, and we are connected to Him through faith.

The best way to learn what faith is is to read God's Word. So I'm going to be quoting it a lot here. Listen to Him. My commentary won't be perfect. But as someone with the duty to pass it on, I try to be as faithful to the Word as I can.

Even though faith is an endlessly deep and glorious subject, which you should always continue learning, at its core it is also something very simple. But it is something that people today often wildly mess up. Some people talk about faith as if it's just knowledge in your head about Christ and His work for you. Some people talk about faith as if it's your decision. Some people talk about faith as if it's an emotional experience. Some people talk about faith as if it's simply being confident. Now, faith can certainly be associated with these things. It does include knowledge of Christ. It goes hand in hand with faithful decision making. It can produce all sorts of emotions among people. And faith is confidence. Scripture says so.

“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of

endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation."
(Hebrews 10–11)

What does this mean? What *is* faith, really, at its core? What does this kind of confidence mean? Confidence in what? Confidence for what? I'd argue that most errors among Christians come from messing up the basic understanding of what faith is in its simplest form.

Have you ever had your parents tell you that you needed to apologize for something? Let's say that, one day, you are playing with your sister, and you decide to hit her on the head with a toy hammer. (Do not do this.) Your parents come to the two of you and demand of you, "Say you're sorry to your sister." And you are very upset at the seeming injustice of the situation. Your sister was totally overreacting to the playful tap on her head with the toy. Grudgingly you mumble, "Sorry. . ."

But then your parents are not satisfied! They can tell you didn't mean it. So they say something like, "It didn't sound like you were really sorry. Try again." Or they might even say, "I think you're only sorry because you got caught." They probably won't let you off until they think you really apologized to your sister.

When your parents tell you to apologize, they want you to mean it from your heart—on the inside, not just the outside. No matter how many times you apologize on the outside, it hardly makes a difference if you don't care on the inside. If you plan to just hit your sister again as soon as no one is looking, there is no point in apologizing. When your parents ask you to apologize, they are asking you to plan to never hit your sister again like that, because it is not good. They are asking you to change on the inside to think of hitting your sister with a hammer as something that is not good. If you say you're sorry, you are saying that you are changed on the inside and do plan to not hit your sister again. You are saying that you wish you had not hit your sister on the head. You do wish that because you listen to your parents when they tell you that something is not good. It doesn't mean you have to understand right at that moment why it isn't good to hit your sister that way. But it means you trust your parents to know more than you, and you will therefore also consider it bad to hit your sister in the future, from your heart.

You apologize because you have confidence in your parents' words. You have faith in your parents. You trust that they know good and evil better than you do. Even though you don't have the experience to see why they say the things they say, if you have faith in your parents' words then, by trusting their words, you have conviction that those things are true.

Now if, instead, you just go through the motions of saying "I'm sorry," and don't mean it from the heart, you are lying. You aren't really sorry. You like hitting your sister and would do it again! Nothing changes in you when your parents tell you not to do that. You only say you are sorry so you can stop getting punished. You don't have faith in your parents' words. Instead, you are trying to deceive your parents.

When you aren't really sorry, it's the same as if you said to your parents, "You have one idea of good and evil, but I have a different idea, and I like my idea better. I don't think it's evil to hit my sister. You are wrong. I am right."

This is basically the same thing that Adam and Eve and Satan did to God in the beginning. They wanted to keep a separate standard of good and evil from God's truth of good and evil. They rebelled against God by rejecting His Word. That separated Adam and Eve from God's goodness. In the same way, when you don't listen to your parents from the heart, you are also trying to separate yourself from them. You might be close to them on the outside, but, on the inside, you pull yourself away from them.

Sometimes we can get away with doing this to our parents, no matter how sad it makes them. But we can't pretend before God our Father in heaven. (Adam and Eve sure tried.)

"The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16)

"I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways. . ." (Jeremiah 17)

"The Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought." (1 Chronicles 28)

"If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart." (Psalm 44)

Where do you get your idea of good and evil from? It has to come from somewhere. If you don't get it from God or your parents, maybe you get it from something you saw on TV. Maybe you get it from other kids you talk to. Maybe you get it from randomly assigned teachers outside your home. Maybe you just come up with it yourself (or you think you do). Whoever you listen to in order to learn truth, to learn what good and evil are, to define how you want to behave, that's who you have faith in.

Maybe you thought it was good to hit your sister because you saw a cartoon character do something like that on TV. You put your faith in that character, and you did the same thing. Or maybe you have a younger brother who saw you hit your sister, and he then copied you and hit her too. Your younger brother had faith in you.

Who do you listen to? Who do you listen to in order to learn what is right and wrong? Who do you go to for advice or help when you're in trouble? Who is the highest authority to define what good and evil are for *you*? Your parents are the ones who teach you first, as God wants them to do. You are to listen to them, and to other authorities God has given for you. But their job is to pass along God's Word to you. They should not come up with standards of good and evil on their own. They should get that from God, and then pass it on to you. God should be their highest authority, and He must be your highest authority. Your faith must be in God. Your faith must be in Jesus. Listen to Him.

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise), 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.'
Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but

bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.” (Ephesians 6)

God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2). That’s why He sent Jesus to teach us. Jesus is the Word made flesh, sent by the Father. He’s the one who tells us that it’s not what we do on the outside that makes us good or evil. It’s who we are on the inside.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. . . .

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your

members than that your whole body go into hell. It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." (Matthew 5)

You are a murderer in God's sight if you have a heart that produces murderous thoughts. You are an adulterer in God's sight if you have a heart that produces adulterous thoughts. Even if you go through the right outward process to justify your adulterous thoughts before men, and you get a certificate and everything, God still sees your heart. And if you lead others into adulterous thoughts in their hearts, God sees that too. If it was your eye that made you an adulterer or your hand that made you hit your sister, you could tear them off and throw them away, and the problem would be solved. But the problem you and I have is worse than that. Our sins come from our hearts. It's our hearts and our inner natures that make us guilty of these things. Our hands only swing hammers because our hearts tell them to. And we can't just tear our hearts out and live.

A sinful human heart never has faith in Jesus on its own. We are by nature Adam's children, separated from the good vine of life that is God. Our hearts are evil. If we were connected to Jesus, the good vine, our hearts would be alive to listen to Him and have faith in him. But because we are by nature disconnected from Him, we don't listen to Him. We don't receive His Word. We are dead.

Jesus had to die in your place to make you alive and to give you faith.

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air [(the devil)], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2)

Jesus died for you. His heart was pierced for your sins. His heart was dead and buried. He was thrown out in your place. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6). Jesus’ heart didn’t stay dead. He rose to life again! And because you are united with Him in baptism, His risen heart is yours too. Now your heart is alive, and you are connected to Christ the vine again. So don’t act as if you were still dead. You aren’t. You are baptized.

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2)

God wants you to have a pure heart and to be a pure child of His, in whom there is no deceit. God wants you to be truly sorry from the heart when you say you are sorry. Anything more than this comes from evil. Because you are baptized into Christ, God's Spirit is given to you, and His heart is yours, and you are God's child. And therefore, God teaches you, disciplines you, and shows you the way that Jesus walked, so that you too may walk in God's ways through faith in Him.

We have the ability to reject this heart though. Walking in faith is not a one-time event in life. Being born is a one-time event. (You only need to be baptized once.) But being alive is not a one-time event. (Just like breathing is not a one-time event.) Being alive is a state of continually receiving God's Word.

Faith listens to God's Word, on the inside. And because faith believes God's Word on the inside, the outside must follow, even when we don't see why we are supposed to do the things God says we should do.

“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11)

You can't take credit for having this life of faith, any more than you can take credit for breathing. Breathing came with the body you were born with. Sure, God has given you the gift of self-control in your breathing. You can even choose to stop breathing if you want. (Do not do this.) But you can't claim credit for the ability to breathe. Your life of faith comes from God. Your faith is a work of God's Holy Spirit in you. (And, fun fact, the word for "Spirit" in the Bible is the same word for "breath".)

So we really can't claim credit for having God's life in us. We can't claim credit for our salvation. This is a gift of God. "By grace you have been saved through faith."

"Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." (Galatians 3)

God uses the example of Abraham all over the Bible to explain faith.

"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For

what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'" (Romans 4)

Righteousness before God isn't about you being perfect in your works. It's about having faith in His Word, in Jesus. That must lead to wanting to live the way God wants you to live. It leads you to be sorry for doing things that God says are bad. But God looks at your heart, not at your outward failures. The sins that you do every day are covered by Jesus' blood because you are baptized into Him and have faith in Him.

"For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'—in the presence of the God in whom he

believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. . . .

“No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Romans 4)

What do we learn from Abraham? We learn that faith is not just wishful thinking in your head. Faith is what led Abraham to actually pick up his knife to sacrifice his son Isaac when God told him to.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11)

Faith doesn’t just think about doing what God says to do. Abraham’s faith listened to God, even when he didn’t understand why God was asking him to sacrifice Isaac. Without questioning God, Abraham simply got up, took his son and his knife, and started carrying out God’s orders. If you say you have faith in God but don’t actually listen to Him or care about what He says, you are pretending. Just

like when you say “I’m sorry” to your parents but don’t really mean it.

“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” And he answered, “I will not,” but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, “I go, sir,” but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.’” (Matthew 21)

This is the distinction that James talks about too—the difference between true faith that is reflected in how we act from the heart and pretending faith that tries to trick God and doesn’t really listen to Jesus.

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be

shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead." (James 2)

There's nothing contradictory between this passage and what Paul wrote or what Jesus said. They are all Scripture. They are all speaking the same Word from God. But note the distinction James is making. He says that Abraham's "faith was completed by his works." He doesn't say "his faith was complemented by works." Faith and good works are distinct concepts, but they are not separate. Works are not an extra ingredient you have to add to faith in order to be saved. That would be separating faith from works, and James says you can't do that, just like you can't separate your belief in your parents' words that hitting your sister is bad from your desire to stop hitting her. Those who say they have faith apart from works don't really have living faith. If you say you're sorry for hitting your sister and then go and deliberately hit her again with glee, you were not really sorry, and you didn't really believe that you shouldn't do that. If Abraham said he had faith in God but then disobeyed when God told him to get up and sacrifice Isaac, he would also be proving that he didn't really believe God. But Abraham believed God, and that was what was counted to him as righteousness. So James here uses the

phrase “faith alone” in the sense that some people talk about a false kind of faith, that doesn’t truly believe God, or listen to Him.

“Jesus said to [the Pharisees], ‘If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.’ They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God.’” (John 8)

To oppose God is to choose evil. To oppose the Author of truth is to choose lies. Maybe the lies will make more sense to you. We are small, and our brains are not big enough to see the whole truth. But lies are still lies. If you try to set up your own standard of good and evil apart from what God says, you are doing what the devil does, and you are lying about good and evil. If you think you see the truth and it’s different from what God says is truth, you are wrong, and you are lying to yourself and to anyone you

share that lie with. No matter how much you grow or learn, you will never be big enough to see the whole picture that God sees. You can only know you have the truth by trusting what God tells you. Trust with confidence that God's Word is truth, and let that truth define your life from the heart, even when it doesn't make sense to you.

That's faith.

Listen to Jesus. Receive your life from Him and through Him.

If faith was just in our heads and didn't also affect how we tried to live, it wouldn't be real faith. We wouldn't actually be listening to Jesus when He says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22). Christ fulfilled the law so that we don't die eternally for our sins, but that life is received by faith. And faith listens to Jesus. So the fruit of faith is a good, disciplined life, which strives always to love the way Christ Himself loved.

We can and will fail many, many times. Even Peter denied Jesus three times. But even Peter was forgiven, not because he did enough good works to make up for his failures but because he repented—he was sorry from the heart—and he trusted God's Word.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned

sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. . . .

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these

things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8)

Even if you fail, that doesn't separate you from God and His life. Your being alive is God's work, not yours. But if God has given you life, and if you're not opposing God or deliberately separating yourself from Him, then you really should, and do, listen to God!

Faith is a beautiful thing, and it is both very simple and very deep. Faith encompasses both God's Law and His Gospel, both His discipline and His good-news promise of your salvation. When God says, “You shall not murder,” (Exodus 20) faith listens and responds, “Yes, Lord, be it unto me according to Your Word.” And when God says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (which you just read above), faith listens and responds, “Yes, Lord, be it unto me according to Your Word.”

That's what it means to listen to Jesus.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.” (John 15)

6 The Word

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.” (John 1)

My dear child in the Lord,

As you grow older, you will probably hear some people say, "What is truth?" (Like Pilate did in John 18) They might say, "How can you tell me what's truly good? There is no truth!" or something silly like that.

I told you before, God is the definition of true good. He's the author and creator of everything. He made the sun, so He knows what the sun truly is. He made tiny subatomic particles, so He knows what those are and how they work. And He made you, so He knows what you truly are too. So of course God is the one who knows what true good is. But this goes for truth in general too.

So we know the answer to Pilate's question: "Your word is truth." That's what Jesus says to God the Father (John 17). "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8).

So God's Word is truth, and abiding in the Word is how we know the truth. God's Word will teach you what you need to know. Jesus will teach you what you need to know. So listen to Him. Great!

"But but but!" someone might say, "How do I know what Jesus means when He says something? People misunderstand each other all the time!" It's true, people do misunderstand each other a lot. Once, when I was a very small boy, I was at a party at someone else's house. I was playing on the floor with some of the other kids who were there. We were playing with some toys they had at the house. One of the kids handed me a toy he had been playing with and said, "Here, you can have this," and then he walked off to do something else. My eyes grew wide. I

thought to myself, “He just gave me this toy and said that it was mine! All mine! I can take it home and play with it forever!” But later, when I and my parents were walking back to the car, my mom noticed I was taking the toy with me, and she promptly scolded me and told me to return it. I did as she asked, but I was very upset at the injustice—the toy was a present, or so I thought. I had the right to take it home! Of course, I know better now, as my mom knew then, that it wasn’t really meant to be a present. When the other boy said, “You can have this,” he wasn’t saying I could take it home. He just meant he was done playing with it for the moment, and I could play with it for a little while. (Actually, I don’t think that other boy even lived there, so it wasn’t even his toy to give to me.) So what was my problem in this story? I was listening to the other boy, and faithfully doing what he said, or so I thought. But I was still wrong. I misunderstood what he was telling me.

If we can misunderstand words like that, how do we know the truth from God’s Word, or know anything for that matter? How do we even *know* what words mean? When a person talks to you, they use words. Are you sure you can know what they are trying to tell you? Why should any words be any different to you from my justice canned probably chicken splat at 3am in petunia? (That made sense, right? Or did that sound like foolishness?)

Some people don’t think you can really know anything. They might say that, for all you can know, nothing you hear or see in the world can be trusted, not even your own senses, and especially not anything anyone else ever tells you. They might say that anything you can ever know is just in your head, and if the knowledge in your head is different from the knowledge in someone else’s head, who’s to say that their knowledge is more accurate than yours? Who’s to say that anyone’s knowledge is accurate?

But by their own words, these people know nothing. That's basically what they say. And for them, it is kind of true. They aren't willing to trust anything or anyone. And if they aren't willing to trust or listen to anything or anyone, if they truly aren't going to let any source of knowledge fill their heads, then it would be impossible for them to ever learn or know anything! (Though, they obviously must have gotten the idea that they shouldn't trust anything by using knowledge that they received from somewhere. . .)

Some people do approach the Bible this way, even people who consider themselves Christian. A friend of mine in college studied how to make computers understand human language. He often liked to talk about how "words never transmit meaning." He would say, "It's up to the hearer to construct a meaning from what comes into his ears." It was very sad, though, how he applied his ideas. He didn't believe anyone could really find truth in the Bible. He believed the Bible was God's Word, but he didn't think he could trust words. Instead, he believed people have to construct their own ideas inside themselves to find God's truth.

You see, my friend believed that listening to God meant that he should read the words God gave in the Bible, and then reshape and replace the words there with the ideas he felt in his heart. He told me he believed that it was impossible for him to get the intended meaning from reading the written Bible, so he needed to find the intended meaning from his heart. He believed that God sent His Holy Spirit to him directly to move his heart to come up with truths and ideas and words, even if those words seem to say very different things from what God's written Word says. Once, I tried to tell him about the truth of God's written Word, and he told me, "You shouldn't be so inconsiderate, speaking as if what you say is true. I respect you by simply stating that what I believe is what I believe."

He was offended because I said that God's Word had a definite meaning that my friend could know. He was offended, because if that was true, then that meant that he could be wrong in the ideas he had made up for himself. It meant that he could be wrong in how he defined good and truth for himself.

Now, my friend was right about something. Words do not send meaning directly into your head when you hear them. If somebody spoke to me in Chinese (which I don't understand), then no matter how much they spoke, no knowledge or meaning of what they were trying to say would come into my head. I would have to be trained in Chinese first, or else it would always sound like foolishness to me, just like my English would probably sound like foolishness to someone who only knew Chinese. You couldn't understand a Chinese Bible unless you understood the language. You couldn't understand an English Bible unless you understood the language.

Similarly, if I have a conversation with my friend (in English) about the Bible, I might say words that make perfect sense to me, but he might not understand the meaning I intend to convey. I might say the words, "Law and Gospel," but these might sound foolish to him because he thinks of different meanings for these words than I think of. He might be missing the knowledge to understand what I mean by my English words just as I am missing the knowledge to understand Chinese.

If I wanted to understand Chinese, I'd need to learn Chinese words. I'd need to understand what Chinese speakers mean by those words. I'd need to be taught Chinese the way you and I have been taught English. And before my friend could understand what I mean by "Law and Gospel," I might need to teach him what I mean by those words. I couldn't give him the meaning by

transmitting it directly into his brain or his heart. I would have to teach him.

The same goes for reading the Bible. God speaks to us using written and spoken words. And that means we have to be taught what words mean. We have to trust human teachers to tell us what words mean.

“Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ . . . And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch. . . and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over and join this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ . . . Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’” (Acts 8)

God doesn't just telepathically communicate with every person. He doesn't mind-control you to make you have the ideas He wants to communicate. He speaks words into your ears, and asks you to listen. He asks you to know Him willingly by faith in His Word. God spoke to Philip using actual words, not just feelings. The Ethiopian eunuch read God's written Word in Isaiah. What did God do when he didn't understand it? Did God telepathically send him the right meaning? No, God sent him a teacher, Philip. And how did Philip explain Isaiah's words? He talked about Jesus.

Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also” (John 14). That’s pretty definite. The Father’s words have a definite meaning, and knowing that meaning is not something I receive directly inside myself—it’s something I receive in Jesus! Jesus is the Word.

The Scriptures are about Jesus. Remember what Jesus said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus? “He said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24).

God teaches us truth using the Scriptures, His Word. Jesus is the Word and Jesus is what God’s Word is about. God doesn’t want us to rely on our own hearts. He wants us to rely on Jesus. If we want to understand God’s truth, like the Ethiopian eunuch did, we look to Jesus. God sent Jesus to be our true human teacher. His words are the Word of the Father who sent him.

“And Jesus cried out and said, ‘Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on

my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” (John 12)

So how do we come to understand Jesus’ words when we don’t already know how? Do we have to wait for someone to come up to us on the road and explain it to us?

Do you remember learning English? Do you remember what it was like when you didn’t know any English words at all? (People don’t usually remember back that far.) How did you come to learn English? When you were an infant, when your head had very little knowledge in it, did you choose what language you would learn? I certainly did not! I had no choice in the matter! (How could I even know what “English” was before I learned to speak?) So how did I learn English? Did my parents speak and instantly transmit their language directly into my head? No, my parents patiently taught me as they raised me. As their child, I was their disciple, and as their disciple I absorbed their language just from them using it around me and explaining what things meant when I didn’t understand. My knowledge and use of English was shaped by the way it was and is used in my earthly father’s house. In other words, I inherited my father’s words. With the faith of a child, my understanding and language conformed to my father’s understanding and language. I learned the way I speak and think about words by listening to my father’s words. It wasn’t something I did intentionally. I just learned English because I was my father’s child, and I listened to him. I learned English words from my father even when I knew absolutely no words to start with. If my parents were to adopt a six-year-old daughter who had been raised speaking Chinese and not English, she would probably

eventually learn the English we speak in our family in the same way. Even though she would have been transferred into our house from the outside, she would learn to speak and understand our words by the same discipleship and by the same childlike faith that I used to learn the words of my adopted father. She would learn to speak the same words as her brothers and sisters.

We as Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ. The way you learned to understand English as an infant from your earthly father is the same way you learn to understand the Word of our heavenly Father. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3). That’s how you know the truth. As God’s child, you let His Word shape your words and your understanding as you read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it.

You could get your ideas about truth from all sorts of sources. You could get them from God. You could get them from the devil, or anyone else who wants to define good and evil differently than God does. Whoever you listen to in order to define how you understand words, that’s who you also listen to in order to define what you believe is truth. So listen to Christ. “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1). His Word is truth because He is the Word that defines what all of creation actually is. He is the Creator. We know that if my understanding of words, the world, or truth disagrees with the understanding defined by the Creator of what is true, my understanding is wrong. That means that for me to *know* the truth, to understand and speak about the world the way Jesus speaks about—and defines—the world, I must be His disciple. I must let my knowledge, my understanding, and my words be defined and shaped by Him and His Word.

Like we read earlier, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth.”

God’s Word is written for you in Scripture. You can learn what it means by being exposed to it richly, just like you learned your first language. You can learn what one part of Scripture means by checking other parts, just like you learned new English words from your parents by asking them (with words) what those words meant. And you learn God’s Word through teachers too. You might still misunderstand the Bible from time to time as you learn the Word, just like I misunderstood the other boy when he gave me the toy. But thankfully, I had my mom there to correct me and teach me. You also have your parents, you have your pastors, and as best as I’m able to help, you have me too. God gives you people like us to be your human teachers of His Word. And we are only good teachers of truth if the Word we pass on to you is Christ’s, not just our own. None of us are perfect—we’re all still learning too. But God’s Word is perfect and it is knowable. God sent His Son into the world so that we could know it. And what we have learned, we pass on to you.

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; . . . giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in

heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. . . . And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. . . . according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.” (Colossians 1)

That’s where my friend in college missed the truth. He knew that words were something that different people could understand in different ways, but he didn’t understand that words and their meanings are always things that we learn by having others pass them on to us. “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10). My friend never got his knowledge of English just from his heart. It was first passed on to him by his parents. You can’t get any knowledge without someone or something passing it on to you. So the real question is: who do you let pass knowledge and truth on to you?

Get truth from the source. Listen to Christ.

It’s important that we learn from our teachers rather than from telepathy. That’s how God designed us to learn. It’s

important that we learn what has been passed down to us. We need translators even just to pass on to us God's Word in a language that we can read. But Jesus must Himself be your first teacher. Ultimately, once you know a normal human language like English, you can read God's Word for yourself. He's the one who really knows the truth. Your teachers have to be accountable to Him, and to the plain Word He has left for us in Scripture. Good teachers teach you to find truth in God's Word. So test the Scriptures always to be sure that what you listen to truly is what God's Word says. Just like the Jews in Berea. "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed" (Acts 17). And translations really are good enough to do that. It's always great to know the Word in its original languages. But you can search the Scriptures pretty well in English too.

And even as you read the Scriptures for yourself, listen to your pastors and those whom God has given authority to teach you. You do not come to God on your own, but are called and joined to Him through the body of Christ, which is His Church. "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Ephesians 4). And that includes your parents too. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise), 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.' Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6).

God's Word with its true meaning is not something we get from or through our own hearts. God's speech is not made from random sounds of foolishness so that we get to fill in the meaning ourselves. God's Word is the Word that brought the order and design of our creation into being. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, . . . full of grace and truth. . . . He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1). **And God's words were written for you "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20).**

Many people might believe in a different source of knowledge than Jesus. They may think that they, as created people, can define truth themselves. They may not believe there is truth at all. But real truth is the way the world actually is, as defined by its Creator, as spoken in His everlasting Word. You know the truth by abiding in the Word of Jesus Christ. Receive His Word, and let the Word dwell in you and define how you understand the world and what things mean.

Know and understand the truth by listening to Christ.

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. . . .

“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise that he made to us — eternal life.” (1 John 2)

7 True Purpose

“Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.”
(Ecclesiastes 1)

“I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.”
(Ecclesiastes 3)

My dear child in the Lord,

“Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?”

Those words always seemed both so silly and so fascinating to me when I was growing up. I still think of some crazy cartoon character getting a bonk on the head, lying down, half-dazed, and saying those words in a very funny voice. The deep personal crisis of those words might seem funny, because how could someone not know who they are? I am me. You are you. How could you forget that? And more importantly, why on earth would someone need to ask why they were here? Don't they know about how God created the world? Don't they know He wants them to be His children to live with Him in heaven?

Well, sadly, no. A lot of people don't know about God or why He created them or what their purpose is in life.

To be honest though, there's a lot packed into those questions that I didn't appreciate when I was little. When I was little, my thinking about life was basically, “I am me. You are you. I don't worry about why I'm here. I just enjoy what's in front of me and try to do what my parents tell me, and life is simple.”

In a way, that kind of thinking really is enough. Listen to what your heavenly Parent tells you and enjoy the good gifts and duties He gives for you to do each day, and life is simple, and life is good.

“And [Jesus] said to his disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they

have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'" (Luke 12)

But there is a bit more that God wants us to think about in this life. Look the very next words of Jesus in Luke 12:

"Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes

in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Clearly, it's important to Jesus how we spend our time here before He takes us to Himself in heaven. He wants you to keep your heart focused on what's to come, not just on enjoying this life. Sometimes, being faithful to God for the next life means things are harder in this life. God doesn't want you to have a selfish heart that hoards money and gold like an evil dragon, but God wants you to love other people the way He loves you. Listen to Jesus. Then, by the power and work of His Word, you will follow Him. You will follow Him in how you live. You will follow Him in death and resurrection. And you will follow Him to heaven and enjoy that better heavenly treasure with Him once you get there.

This life doesn't last long. It seems like a long time ahead of you. Old people like to talk about how fast time flies by, and how, once you're old, you look back and see how fast everything happened. I'm a lot older than I once was, but my future still seems like a very long time ahead of me sometimes. But when I've completed a day, it's hard to imagine how I had once thought that day would be distant in the future. Yesterday seemed like it would be a long day, and it kind of was at the time. But now it's today. Yesterday is already gone. I won't get to redo yesterday again.

What did you do yesterday? A harder question: what did you do yesterday that you still have to show for it today?

I'm not sure I did much yesterday that still matters today. What will I have done today that will still matter tomorrow?

When this life is over, what will you have here that will still matter in the next life? Do you get to take anything with you to heaven? Money? Nope. Gold and silver, precious treasures, or fancy sculptures or artwork? Nope. Houses or boats or planes or computers or toys? Nope. Clothes? Nope, not even clothes. Nothing you can collect here gets to come with you. It will just be you before God, your Maker, without anything you might carry in your hands or any shirt to wear on your back.

So what's the point of doing anything here before you die, if nothing gets to come with you?

Well, you see it's not quite true that you don't get to take anything with you when you die. There is one thing in particular that does last across both this life and the next. People!

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

(1 Corinthians 15)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” (John 5)

You are immortal. Your parents and your friends are immortal. Everyone is. That’s how God created us. When we die, we’ll all be resurrected again in new bodies. Some will rise to eternal life with God, but those who rejected God will rise to judgment, to spend eternity outside of Him.

That’s what this life is for. People.

God’s command to Adam and Eve in the good garden of Eden was to be fruitful and multiply, to grow God’s kingdom. Jesus’ command to His disciples was basically the same, to go throughout all the world, making disciples to grow God’s kingdom, baptizing them and teaching them His good Word. “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16).

Your purpose in life is to grow God’s kingdom and to be part of God’s kingdom. Jesus described this life as a kind of staging ground for the next life. He described it as a field of growing plants waiting for harvest. This life is where members of God’s kingdom are grown, and the next life is where we get to really start living. You might also think of

this life as like a factory for making members of God's kingdom. Or like a school for God's kingdom, where you graduate when you die. But God describes it as like a garden, like a field of plants, so that's the way we should think of it too.

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. . . . As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

“He put another parable before them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?” He said to them, “An enemy has done this.” So the servants said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” But he said, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest,

and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"" (Matthew 13)

God also speaks of the people in His kingdom as a growing body.

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." (Ephesians 4)

Does this mean everybody has to be a missionary or a pastor? No, there are lots of other jobs that need to be done in this life to support the work of growing God's kingdom. What would a pastor eat if there were no farmers or bakers? What would the people who need to hear the Word eat?

"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ

according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12)

You have lots of people around you. You have your family. You can support them in their work. And even if you aren't a pastor or a missionary, you can share the words of Jesus to everyone around you. In fact, you should share the words of Jesus however you can.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9)

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5)

And that's what Jesus did too. Listen to Jesus. Follow in His footsteps. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19).

If you grow up to have a family of your own one day, by God's grace you can get to take all your kids with you into eternity. And as you spread God's Word and God's love to other people you love, you can hope to enjoy everlasting life with them too. It's the work of the Holy Spirit to create saving faith in people's hearts, but God has said that He uses our words to bring that about.

“‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10)

The real best life in God's kingdom is still to come, in the resurrection. This life here is the garden that's growing that kingdom. God has given us the job of growing His kingdom in preparation for that wonderful day.

That's who we are. That's why we're here. That's our purpose in life. And I look forward to celebrating the resurrection with you when Jesus comes to take us home.

And that life is the life we live by listening to Christ.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8)