

 CORE CHRISTIANITY

WHAT DID GOD PROMISE?



STUDENT'S EDITION

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INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS STUDY

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

This study was designed with several things in mind.

First, we designed this study to advance the gospel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Christians who want to get a good foundation in the basics, this study is a complete, self-contained study on the promises God made to his people. For Christians who want to go deeper, we recommend reading Michael Horton's book *Core Christianity: Finding yourself in God's Story*.

Before you begin the first lesson, watch this video where Michael Horton gives an overview of what you can expect in this study: <https://vimeo.com/260136923/dffb36b07c>.

LESSON 1: GOD PROMISED A SAVIOR

READ

From the very beginning of the Bible, we learn that God is a promise maker. He promises Adam and Eve that one of their offspring will crush the serpent's head, thereby bringing salvation (Gen. 3:15). As we move forward in Scripture, we see God continually make covenant promises to the people he chooses. He makes such a promise with Noah, promising to save him and his family from the flood (Gen. 6:18). He makes another with Abraham, promising to make him a great nation, to bless him, and to bless all families of the earth in him (Gen. 12:1-3).

As we trace these covenant promises throughout the Bible, we see a common thread that holds them together. That thread is the hope of a savior. In each covenant God gives us more and more information about the offspring of the woman who is yet to come. The who, what, when, where, and how about the savior are progressively revealed throughout the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, we learn that all of these covenant promises find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus and his death and resurrection. What we discover as we study the story of redemption is that the God of Israel always keeps his word. God's covenant promises never fail, even though his people fail over and over again. Despite their sin God is gracious towards Israel and he brings salvation, not just to them, but to the world through the promised Messiah.

The Exodus: The Pattern of Redemption

Even though Abraham's wife was barren at the time, God promised to fulfill his promise to Abraham through a son, Isaac (Gen 21:12). Isaac fathered Jacob, later given the name Israel, who had 12 sons that would go on to form what are known as the "twelve tribes of Israel."

If we fast forward several hundred years from God's covenant with Abraham, we find that things don't look so good for his descendants. They are enslaved by the Egyptians, and a command from Pharaoh to kill all male infants threatens to wipe them out entirely.

The Bible tells us the Israelites groaned under the weight of their oppression and cried to God for help. We read, "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with

Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). God responds by sending a deliverer, Moses. Moses led Israel to freedom after God demonstrated his power and might through the ten plagues he sent against Egypt. Once the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were safe from the Egyptians, they traveled to Mount Sinai. There God again made a covenant with his people: the Mosaic Covenant.

God began by saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). It is only after recounting the history of the Israelite peoples’ relationship with Him that God gave them the law.

God graciously freed Israel from captivity to a foreign power. They were sinful and yet he had mercy and redeemed his people. God did not forget the promise he had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This was true for Israel in the Exodus, and it is true for those of us who have believed in Christ. Though we were sinners, God loved us and freed us from captivity—not to a geopolitical power, but to sin. Even as far back as the Exodus we see that God had a plan for salvation. He promised Adam and Eve a savior, and in the Exodus we see the pattern of salvation.

Sin: The Persistent Problem

Once God had freed the Israelites and led them to Sinai, you might think they would be so full of gratitude that they would worship and obey him exclusively. When you read the story, however, you see that this expectation is far from accurate.

Despite their experience of God’s goodness and power, the Israelites quickly deserted him. While Moses was still on Mount Sinai receiving the law from God, the Israelites created and began worshipping a golden calf. This highlights the very reason God had given the law to Israel. The law was meant to be a temporary teacher. Paul writes, “The law was our guardian until Christ came” (Galatians 3:24). The law taught the Israelites just how sinful and rebellious they were. The law was meant to teach God’s people how much they needed his forgiveness and grace, and it shows us how desperately we need a savior who can obey God perfectly.

As time goes on, this need became clearer and clearer to Israel. Perhaps it is never more obvious than during the time of the Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Israel could not obey God; they needed a king to unite and lead them in obedience. They needed a king who could deal with the problem of sin once and for all. They needed the promised savior.

The very first king of Israel seemed wonderful. Saul was a strong, respected, handsome man. However, as amazing as he looked outwardly, his heart was rotten. He did not obey God, and so God rejected him and appointed a new king.

The second king, David, was a man who truly loved God and yearned to follow him. Though he was not perfect, David was a sharp contrast from Saul. He was a God-fearing king, and it is to him that God made another promise about the coming savior. In the Davidic Covenant God promised, “I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:12-13).

In this moment, the Messiah was narrowed down to a single descendant of David, one who will establish an eternal, unshakable, perfect kingdom. From this point forward in Scripture, we keep our eyes firmly fixed on the line of David.

The Exile: God’s Righteous Judgment

As we continue on in the story, we find that Israel was still disobedient to God’s law. They were still unfaithful to him and go after other gods.

Soon after David’s son Solomon died, the kingdom split between the North and the South, Israel and Judah. In both kingdoms, there was a move away from God. There were good kings here and there in the South, but overall Israel and Judah were not faithful to God. During this time, God sent many prophets to warn the Northern and Southern kingdoms that God would judge them if they do not repent.

Ultimately their warnings were ignored. Assyria conquered Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and 136 years later Babylon conquered Judah, the Southern Kingdom. God’s people were forced to leave the land he had promised Abraham and live as exiles in foreign countries. This was a dark moment in the history of God’s people. Yet even when all hope seemed lost, God’s promises stood firm. Through the time of the exile God ensured that the line of David continued (Ruth 4:13-21).

Christ: The Fulfillment of God’s Covenant Promises

The New Testament begins, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). We see that the story of the Bible finds its climax in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the descendant of Abraham through whom all nations will be blessed. He is the one who can and does obey God’s law perfectly. He is David’s rightful heir, a perfect eternal king. He is also the promised seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15; Lk.3:23-38).

Christ alone deserved to be praised and rewarded by God for his perfect obedience to the Father. Yet he freely gave that right up and instead submitted to the Father by going to the cross to die the death that we deserve for our rebellion and unfaithfulness to God. He freely

offered himself as a sacrifice on our behalf, and in his death received the punishment we deserve.

But this is not the end of the story! Jesus conquered death itself in his resurrection. He was crucified in humility, but he is raised in splendor. Paul tells us that because Jesus was obedient to the Father, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

When we place our faith in Christ, we receive all of God’s covenant promises. We have entrance into God’s kingdom as sons and daughters, and we will receive eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. Christ is the fulfillment of all God’s covenant promises. Throughout human history, God has had a gracious plan to bring salvation through Christ not just to his chosen people the Israelites, but to any who believe from all the nations of the earth!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you see the pattern of salvation in your own life?

2. Consider God’s faithfulness to Israel despite Israel’s repeated disobedience. What does this tell you about the character of God?

3. Reflect on what Jesus had to do in order for God to keep his promise. If Jesus had not come to fulfill the promise, what would happen to us?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do we learn about our salvation from the Exodus?

2. How do you think about and relate to the Old Testament Mosaic Law?

3. What promises do we receive in Christ and how does that bring hope or encouragement to the circumstances in your life?

LESSON 2 : GOD PROMISED TO BLESS ALL THE NATIONS

READ

Long ago, in a faraway land, God spoke to Abram. Remarkably, what God said to Abram millennia ago is still relevant to people who live everywhere throughout the world today. God called Abram, and said to him,

“Go from your country and from your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1-3)

This promise to Abram, referred to as the “Abrahamic Covenant,” was a gracious act on God’s part that revealed His universal purpose to bless not only Abram and his relatives, but the *whole world!* In fact, in the story, God would later change Abram’s name to Abraham, to reflect the fact that he would be the father of many nations. “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” (Gen. 17:5)

These promises are a part of what theologians call the covenant of grace. Here the word “covenant” refers to a very special promise that has solemn obligations attached to it. It’s binding, like a contract. Here, in these chapters of the Bible, God took the initiative and bound himself to blessing the whole world through Abraham. From the very beginning, God has intended to bless every race and culture of people. As the story of the Bible unfolds, it reveals how God carried out his promise, even amidst human failure.

Through Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, God intended to carry out his universal promise of blessing. Instead of following God, though, Israel began to embrace the pagan practices of neighboring nations. Rather than reflecting God’s light, and love, they turned their backs on God. During this dire time, God raised up prophets to call Israel back to himself. These men reminded the Israelites of God’s promises to them, and of their call to follow him. Sadly, instead of obeying the prophets, Israel persisted in disobedience until the nation was fractioned and ultimately exiled from the land of promise.

It seemed for a time as though God had perhaps forgotten what he told Abraham. These were dark times in the story of Scripture, but God gave a glimmer of hope through Isaiah the prophet. Not only would he restore his wayward people, but he would also bless the nations.

“And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him – for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength – he says: ‘Is it too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’” (Isa. 49:5-6)

God had not forgotten about his covenant of salvation that would extend to all nations. In fact, he was accomplishing his purposes *even through Israel’s disobedience*. One would come, formed in the womb, a true and obedient servant, who would be the light of the world. This one would carry out the promise made to Abram long before, and bring joy to the world.

Jesus the Promised Savior

Isaiah the prophet was talking about Jesus Christ. When Jesus was born, the angels who attended his birth told a group of shepherds, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be *for all the people!*” (Lk. 2:10) And the heavenly host were breaking out into joyous song, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Lk. 2:14) The wonderful promise given to Abram long before found its joyous fulfillment in Jesus (Lk. 1:54-55).

When Jesus was presented in the temple as an infant, a pious man named Simeon blessed him, saying, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk. 2:29-32). Through Jesus, God carried out his promise to be a light to the Gentiles.

Jesus made this especially clear on one occasion, when he challenged the religious leadership at the temple. The priests of the day had turned the temple into a marketplace where sacrificial animals were sold for profit. Jesus reminded them of the Father’s original intent for his temple by quoting Isaiah 56:7, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’ But you have made it a den of robbers.” (Mk. 11:17)

Despite Israel’s failures, Jesus came to gather and bless the nations according to the ancient promise back in Genesis. Speaking of his death on the cross, Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” (Jn. 12:32) When Jesus was exalted on the cross, he was exalted for every race, culture, tongue, and tribe. He was accomplishing the blessing which Abram could only imagine millennia prior. Jesus revealed

himself as the mediator of the great covenant of grace that God had given long before. This means that the benefits of that gracious promise come through Him, and not through anyone else. Jesus is the only way, the only person through whom God offers sinners life and salvation through faith (Acts 4:12).

The Gospel Sent Abroad

The salvation that Jesus accomplished is now being spread abroad through the ministry of the church. Not only does the ancient promise relate to you, but God also includes you in the story as a means of spreading the promise to the world! After Jesus' resurrection, prior to ascending into heaven, he gave his disciples some final marching orders—the Great Commission—saying, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:19-20).

The mission of the church on earth today is to carry out the ancient promise given to Abraham and accomplished by Jesus to spread the hope of salvation to every tribe, tongue, and nation. The church is the recipient of God's great grace, and it is called to extend that grace by being the “light of the world.” (Matt. 5:14).

The light that shines is two-fold. It is the glorious truth of the gospel, that Jesus Christ has accomplished salvation for us apart from anything we do. It is also evidenced by the good works Christians have that are the result of faith in Jesus. The church can't save anyone, only Jesus can. But Jesus uses the church to extend his salvation to others.

God isn't just concerned with one people group or ethnicity. The church is a beautiful tapestry made of the nations of the world purchased by the blood of Jesus, and God is weaving it together. The great news is, God has promised that he's going to accomplish this! We are receiving a glorious kingdom from God, and carrying the message of that kingdom to our friends and neighbors in the world today. God is so committed to blessing the whole world that He sent his own Son to make sure the job would get done. The church, united to Jesus, continues to carry out his redemptive purposes to all nations. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, the church is responsible for carrying out the great commission, given to the apostles by Jesus. Once you've been made a partaker of God's promises, you get to share them with others!

In the next lesson, we'll take a closer look at how we are made partakers of God's promise through the great exchange of our sin for Jesus' righteousness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where do you fit in God’s purpose to “bless the nations”?

2. Reflect on how God’s promise to “bless the nations” is coming true today.

3. How does God’s promise to bring in his people from all over the world give us confidence in the face of the world’s messiness, danger, and death?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Based on the story of redemption, how important would you say reaching the nations is to God, and what is our role in this?

2. Does this story provide us with any practical insight about some of the issues of the world today, especially as it relates to the racial conflicts that have existed in the United States, and throughout the world?

3. Given what you learned in this lesson, what will God's kingdom be like in the new creation?

LESSON 3: GOD PROMISED FORGIVENESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

READ

Previous lessons have traced God's promise to Israel and its extension to every nation, touching only briefly on the fulfillment of that promise. In this lesson, we'll dive deeper in how God could keep his promise of salvation through Christ without compromising his holiness or his love.

What does the word *exchange* bring to mind? One of the more common ways we think about an exchange is with money. Your four quarters equals his one dollar bill. Your \$800 equals Apple's next tech toy of the day. What would happen if you tried to give your local bank a bag of filthy trash for a few stacks of hundred dollar bills? No way! That's no exchange, that's a complete rip-off.

Beyond money, we think of an exchange as being *I'll give you this if you give me that*. We do jobs expecting payment in return. We help friends expecting them to return the favor when we need it next. We feel obligated to "pay back" those who've helped us. We even expect thanks and a better reputation when we give people gifts, maybe even hoping for a social media post praising our generosity. We clearly have certain expectations about what makes a proper exchange: you give something away to receive something else you've agreed is of equal value.

In *Core Christianity*, Michael Horton describes the exchange that lies at the heart of the gospel. He says, "God declares unrighteous people to be righteous even while they are still unrighteous in themselves because they are now in union with Christ" (127). *In the great exchange, Jesus has taken our sin upon himself and credited his righteousness to our account*. He took the wrath that our sin deserved and gave us the new life that his perfect obedience earned. This exchange shatters our idea of what makes a good exchange because this isn't an equal exchange, but clearly an unequal one.

Let's take advantage of this focus and consider why we needed this great exchange and what happened in it.

Man on His Own

Let's begin by reading Romans 3:9-20. It begins with the knock-out punch saying, "Both Jews and Greeks are under sin" (v. 9). Paul's intention here is to address both his Jewish readers along with everyone else. Everyone is under sin.

In case someone doesn't quite grasp what this means, Paul goes on to explain in detail. Using much of God's word from the Psalms, Paul reminds his readers exactly how far away they are from being righteous before God as they stand on their own merit. Using words that in English mean *none, no one, all, not even one*, Paul unapologetically lays out the condition of fallen man. Fallen man has no righteousness, no desire for God, and ultimately no goodness or worth to be able to enter God's kingdom (v. 10-12).

He then continues from verse 13 to 18 to express the rotten fruit that comes from this state as he rails over the death, lies, and harm that comes from our mouths alone along with the ravaging and recklessness we produce with our actions. Truly "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (v. 18). Paul finishes by stating that ultimately "the whole world" is "held accountable to God" by the law and that this law brings no justification for man, but only "knowledge of sin" (v. 20).

Just like our first parents, Adam and Eve, we too often ignore the law of God for the sake of our own pursuits of quick pleasure (Gen. 3). Yet our situation is even more bleak than theirs. In the original covenant of works that God had established with Adam, Adam and Eve were created both *able to sin* and *able not to sin*. And because Adam failed to obey God's law, we have been born *only able to sin* ever since (Rom. 3:9-18; 5:12-14). We don't naturally think first about *what would God want me to do in this situation*, but rather *what do I want right now and how can I get it with as little pain as possible*.

Where does this leave us? Our time of saying, "I can do it myself," will inevitably come to an end. We have no hope of escaping our sins. We have no place to run away from the coming punishment for the harm we have caused others, the harm we have caused ourselves, and the harm we have ultimately caused God. Indeed, God has already assured the final result for sin, but praise him that he has also assured hope for his people (Rev. 20:11-22:5). Those who remain opposed to Christ will be under his judgment forever, and those who have faith in Christ will be kept in his care forever.

Christ's Perfection and Payment

Through a sacrificial death, Jesus paid for our sins. Sin isn't something God simply brushes under the rug or stores in the shed that no one is supposed to look inside. Sin is an offense of the highest level against the creator and ruler of everything. Sin is the attempt of man to

rise above the glory of God. Sin must be dealt with, and for the people of God, it was dealt with by the suffering work of Jesus.

Not only did Jesus live perfectly to fulfill the covenant of works, but he also bore the wrath of God that was intended for the sins of his chosen people so that he could be with his people forever (Rom. 5:6-11). The center of this wrath is recorded in Scripture through the bogus court case against Jesus that ultimately led to his suffering all the way to the cross, as he hung on the cross, and from the cross into the grave. Jesus's final words, "It is finished," declared the penalty paid, the guilt washed clean, and the fear removed (John 19:30).

Through a righteous life, Jesus exchanged the righteousness we could never earn for our sin. Being that Jesus is God, he was able to become a human being without a sinful nature, for sin cannot be in God (John 1:1-18; Ps. 5:4). This was the first order of business for the life of Jesus: to fulfill the covenant of works that Adam broke. Jesus is, and will forever remain, the only person who has earned righteousness. He proved himself to be acceptable to the Father by the power of the Spirit through his perfect obedience to God's will. *This* righteousness is the righteousness that Jesus has credited to us. Even more than that, Jesus took upon himself our sin and paid the death penalty for it in our place. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

This is good news. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ voluntarily took our garbage and gave us his riches (2 Cor. 5:21; Zech. 3:1-5). He has done so in such a way that the Father looks at us and sees the righteousness of Jesus. Despite the fact that he had every right to be blessed by God, Jesus chose instead to take on the curse and punishment we deserve for our disobedience. This was the reason he came to earth. He was sent by God the Father to be our substitute. He came to suffer and die for our sin. Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) If we place our faith in Christ, he takes our sins with him to the cross and the punishment we deserve is meted out on him. The incredible truth of the gospel is that in return for our sin Christ gives us his righteousness, that is, his life of perfect obedience to cover up our sin and guilt.

God promised life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam earned death, but Jesus stepped in his place and earned life (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; Lev. 18:4-5; Gen. 2:15-17). Now Paul can say that we have been justified in God's sight by faith apart from our works, for while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:1-2, 6-10). Despite our sin, God welcomes us into his presence because God has declared us righteous in Christ and receives us as his adopted children (Gal. 4:4).

Through Christ's great exchange, we can now live full of gratitude, assurance, hope, and focus. We are grateful for his love because we know we didn't deserve it. We rest with

assurance knowing that God has done it all, no one can challenge him, and we will therefore remain with him forever. We are filled with *hope* as we understand that his love is greater than all things. No matter how much pain or happiness this life can bring us, he will always love us.

Finally, we are set with a firm focus in life, realizing that our life was given to us, that it belongs to him, and so all that we do must be done as a response to the embrace of our Father, the grace of Jesus, and the care of the Spirit. Christ chose to show us love when we desired nothing more than to spit his name out of our mouth (Luke 22:54-62). Christ willingly had the flesh ripped off his back so that ours could have a comforting massage (Mark 15:15; Isa. 53:5).

We had nothing to offer and Christ gave us everything. Jesus looks at his people's hopeless state, pulls them from the grave, gives them new life, and brings them into the family of God (Eph. 2:1-6). Talk about a truly *great* exchange! Who would exchange sin and death for righteousness and life? The answer is that God did, and when we try to grasp this work of Jesus, there is only one way to understand it: Christ loves us unconditionally. If you love Jesus, it is because he loved you first (1 John 4:19). We can look to Christ and marvel that he gives his people true and unconditional love.

In the final lesson of this study, we'll see how the great exchange makes us children of God and how this was always part of God's promise to his people.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Reflect on the inequality of the exchange Christ made—our sin for his righteousness. Where would we be if Christ had not taken our sin upon himself?

2. It's easy to convince ourselves that we are fairly good people. Why aren't our best efforts enough to make us righteous before God?

3. How does understanding the fact that we are not able not to sin help us appreciate what Jesus did for us?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does the great exchange transform our lives?

2. What does Christ's work on earth teach us about the character of God?

3. Read Ephesians 1:3-10. How do the blessings listed here flow out of God's faithfulness to his covenant promise?

LESSON 4: GOD PROMISED TO BE A FATHER

READ

One of the most remarkable moments in the New Testament occurred when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. What was out of the ordinary was not *that* Jesus taught them to pray, but *how* he told them to address God in prayer. He taught them and us that we can call God “Our Father.” It is true that God is spoken of as a Father in the Old Testament, but, when Jesus teaches us to call God Father when we pray, he is calling us to a deeper and more intimate fellowship with God. In fact, J.I. Packer argues that “the revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense the climax of the Bible.”

To understand our adoption as children of God we must trace the overarching drama of redemption as it progressively unfolds over the pages of Scripture. We will trace this narrative through three acts: Guilt, Grace, Gratitude.

Guilt

Luke describes Adam as “the son of God (Luke 3:38). He was God’s first son, that is, the first man God created. From the beginning Adam had a perfect relationship with his creator. He knew God, talked with him, and walked with him. He lived under God’s authority, recognizing his purpose was to love and obey his maker. God was not far off and distant; he was near. He provided and cared for Adam’s needs, he gave him rules and directions, and—in short—he was a Father to Adam.

As we know, this state of affairs would change drastically. Adam and Eve sinned against their Father, they rejected his authority and rule. As a result, God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden and out of his presence. Humanity no longer had a perfect relationship with their heavenly Father.

Sin had entered the world through Adam “and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12) Today we also are estranged from God because of Adam’s rebellion. As a result, when God looks down on humanity he sees that “there is none who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:3) The stain of guilt and pollution of sin defiles every single person through Adam.

The result of Adam's sin is that we are all spiritual orphans. Our relationship with our creator is severed. Try as we may, we cannot fix this problem on our own. We can't be obedient enough for God to take us back. Paul describes the utter hopelessness of our situation when he says, "By works of the law no human being will be justified." (Romans 3:20) We will always disobey and fall short of God's rules.

If this was the entire message of the Bible, it would be a profoundly depressing book. It would only show us the myriad of ways we fail to measure up to God's standard and therefore deserve punishment. The good news, however, is that God has provided a way to be saved from his just wrath. Paul goes on to say, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... and are justified by his grace as a gift" (Romans 3:21-24). The gospel message is that even though we are guilty before God, we can be forgiven and declared righteous if we believe in Christ!

Grace

The good news at the heart of the Bible is that God has chosen to show us grace. If we believe in Christ, we receive salvation! How can this be? This is possible because Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. Jesus was fully human, born of Mary, yet fully divine, conceived by the Holy Spirit. This means that he was born without the original sin and guilt that all descendants of Adam inherit. Christ was able to and did live a life of perfect obedience to God. The incredible truth of the gospel is that in return for our sin Christ gives us his righteousness, that is, his life of perfect obedience to cover up our sin and guilt.

What is truly mind-boggling is the fact that the good news of God's grace doesn't stop here. He doesn't stop after providing a way out of judgment. God doesn't do the bare minimum to ensure that we can have eternal life. God goes far above and beyond what we deserve by graciously blessing us in every possible way. The Bible says that we have been blessed in Christ with every single spiritual blessing possible (Ephesians 1:3). We are chosen by God, not only for salvation, but to become part of his family! Paul writes, "[God] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." (Ephesians 1:5) In Christ we receive a new identity. We are children of the living God. In Christ, we have a renewed relationship with our creator.

He is no longer a fearsome judge but a loving, patient, forgiving, caring Father. The grace God displays when he adopts us leads not only into a different relationship with God, but should also radically impact how we live our lives. When we truly grasp God's grace, which frees us from our guilt, our hearts will be filled to overflowing with gratitude. This thankfulness and joy for God's grace is what marks the life of a son or daughter of God.

Gratitude

God does not need to adopt us. He could, in theory, save us without entering into that more intimate, familial relationship of father and child. God freely chooses to adopt us. Receiving that blessing completely changes not only how we live, but why we live the way we do. Paul puts it this way:

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Romans 8:12-15)

In Christ, we are freed from slavery to sin, that is, our flesh. We are out from under the law and the never-ending, never-successful quest to be good enough for God to accept and love us. Instead we live as God’s children under grace. Living under grace does not mean we can do whatever we want. We still seek to live holy lives, to obey God, and to kill off our sins. However, the motivation for obedience is love for God our Father and gratefulness for his fatherly care. This motivation is completely different for a life lived under grace than a life lived under the law.

As Christians, we obey God not in hopes that he will allow us to be his children, but because we already are his children. For the Christian who lives under grace, the law is a guide for the good life. It shows us the way God created us to live. We seek to obey it because it pleases our Father. We want to thank him for creating us and loving us. We want to show our gratitude for his incredible grace, patience, mercy, and goodness which he has lavished on us in Christ. This is the driving force behind a life lived under the unfathomable grace and love of God our Father.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What ways have you have you experienced the pattern of guilt, grace, and gratitude in your life?

2. What usually motivates your obedience to God, the law or the gospel of grace? Are there any areas of your life where you can rethink your motives?

3. How does the fatherhood of God inform your dreams, hopes, goals, and actions in life?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If God didn't have to adopt us into his family, why did he?

2. The phrase "in Christ" says a lot about the nature and blessings of our salvation. Take some time to discuss all the things that come with being "in Christ" (revisit Ephesians 2 if necessary).

3. How would you talk to a friend about the loving fatherhood of God if they didn't grow up with a good and loving father? Where could we go to see God's faithful care displayed?
