

CORE

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A FIFTEEN-MINUTE DAILY GUIDE
TO BUILD **YOUR BIBLE IQ** IN A YEAR

MARK E. MOORE

CORE 52

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To Larrie Fraley and Jason Beck

ELECTION | MATTHEW 26:14-25 | SUPERNATURAL

Though a man might prevail against one who
is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold
cord is not quickly broken.

—ECCLESIASTES 4:12

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Introduction

Do you want to know the Bible better?

You're not alone. You're not even in the minority. Eighty percent of people in church want to know the Bible better. Surprisingly, the desire may be even stronger in those outside the church. In a recent survey here in Phoenix, 60 percent of those who said they were interested in the Bible were not connected with any church.

There's a reason so many people want to know the Bible better: they know the Bible will make *them* better.

The positive impact of Scripture on individuals, families, and society has been proved time and again. One study involving one hundred thousand people over eight years showed dramatic results. This research (by Arnold Cole and Pamela Caudill Ovwigho of the Center for Bible Engagement) showed that those who engage the Bible four or more times a week experienced far less destructive behavior: 62 percent less drunkenness, 59 percent less pornography use, 59 percent less sexual sin, and 45 percent less gambling. These results were not from guilt manipulation but were rather the mark of personal transformation. The positive message of Scripture allowed individuals to reduce bitterness by 40 percent, destructive thoughts by 32 percent, isolation by 32 percent, inability to forgive by 31 percent, and loneliness by 30 percent.¹

Bible engagement improves your self-esteem, family structure, and social interactions. It's "the single most powerful predictor of spiritual growth."² So if you want to know the Bible better—you'll be better for it.

Since so many people who want to know the Bible better are not in church, we can't rely on pastors as the sole delivery system for Scripture. Lay leaders must take responsibility for bringing biblical truths to their networks at work, at home, and in the community. That's the purpose of this book. It's not designed

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to make you smart; it's designed to make you effective. Those who move from Bible curiosity to Bible confidence are far more likely to engage their gifts in service to others for God's glory. Bible confidence fosters social engagement, acts of compassion, and community transformation.

Why do so many want to know the Bible better and so few actually succeed? You likely already know the answers: (1) we're too busy, and (2) we don't know where to start.

What if you could remove both of those barriers? What if you had a clear plan that could easily fit your frantic schedule? That's precisely what's offered in this book. If you can carve out fifteen minutes a day, five days a week, for one year, you'll know the vast majority of what every preacher preaches. That sounds like a pretty audacious claim, but it's well within reach. We have simply applied the Pareto principle (or the 80/20 rule) to the Bible. This rule states that 20 percent of your effort yields 80 percent of the results in virtually every endeavor in life. That's true with the Bible as well.

You hold in your hand fifty-two of the most powerful passages in the Bible—and a faithful representation of the Bible's full message. By grasping these “vital few” verses, you'll wrap your mind around the entire Bible with minimal time and effort. Each of these verses is like a trajectory that runs the length of the Bible. By understanding any single verse in this collection, you'll be able to master dozens of other verses that reflect the same spiritual principle. If you understand the primary passage, dozens of others will fall into place.

Let me introduce myself. For twenty-two years I was a New Testament professor at Ozark Christian College. My job was to train pastors. In 2012 I traded my title Professor Moore for that of Pastor Mark—at Christ's Church of the Valley in Phoenix. It's one of those ridiculously large churches that are often more comfortable for those who've never been to church than for those who grew up in church. I serve as a teaching pastor, helping those far from God navigate that large and intimidating book called the Bible.

This book in your hands is really a culmination of my two professional roles. For decades I dug deep into Scripture. Now I want to bring to the surface the

freshest water from the deepest well. People's buckets hold only so much, so I've chosen specific passages with the highest ROI ("return on investment") and the greatest potential for practical application. With this core, you can go further faster, moving from curiosity to confidence. Think of me as your personal trainer for spiritual growth. Each exercise is a punctuated moment (I want to respect your time) with a massive upside potential. With the help of the Holy Spirit, you'll make the most of your strategic investment in Scripture to exponentially increase your impact on society.

Here's the three-pronged strategy I followed for putting this project together:

1. Identify fifty-two of the most influential texts in the Bible.
2. In a brief essay (one for every week of the year), show the trajectory each text takes and how it can affect our lives practically.
3. Augment each essay with four specific tools to help connect the dots and extend the impact of the text: (1) a Bible passage that illustrates the core text, (2) trajectory verses for meditation, (3) an action step for application, and (4) a further resource for exploration.

So here's the strategic plan for helping you master the entire Bible in a single year—fifteen minutes a day, five days each week:

- **Day 1:** *Read the essay.* Following the essay are three key points to check for comprehension. If any of them are unclear, reread those portions of the essay. (You may find it helpful to read the key points first and then read the essay to know what to look for.)
- **Day 2:** *Memorize the core text* and review verses from the previous two weeks.
- **Day 3:** *Read a story or other passage from the Bible* that illustrates the text of the week. By reading these stories in light of the core text, you'll notice how the key principle was expressed in the real lives of God's people.

By the way, not all these stories apply directly to the text of the week. So why read through them? Because they represent the core

biographies that give the best context for the theology embedded in the core verses. The combination of the core verses and the foundational passages will increase your Bible IQ.

- **Day 4:** *Read through the three trajectory passages*, meditating on their implications and connections. You might begin by reviewing the core text from memory.
- **Day 5:** *Put it into practice* by scheduling a time for the action step. No exercise should take more than thirty minutes, and each should be accomplished that same week to embed the principle in practical application.
- *Additional options:* You'll see for each week an "overachiever challenge"—an additional key passage to consider memorizing. (Learn them all, along with the core verses, and the total in your arsenal will be over a hundred verses!) There's also a weekly reference to a helpful book you may want to explore as a "bonus read."

Welcome to the journey from curiosity to confidence. You can do this! By mastering the core, you'll build a firm framework for being an ambassador of Jesus Christ to a world hungering for truth that transforms.

You're more needed now than ever. Our culture is reeling from the demise of biblical literacy. As you gain confidence, you'll find yourself at the epicenter of God's solution in your own circle of influence. God has designed you uniquely for such a time as this.



Creation

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

—GENESIS 1:1

Question: Why are we here?

We live in an immense universe on an extraordinary little blue ball. There's no question it's a masterpiece, and at its center is the human species. Yet each of us, treading across this sacred space, wonders why we're here. What's our part to play in this theater of life?

That all depends on the answer to the following three questions.

Who Created This World?

All artists leave fingerprints on their work. So knowing the creation gives a glimpse into the nature of the creator. The Bible teaches that God is actually three in one: Father, Son, and Spirit. Though the clearest glimpses of this “Trinity” are in the New Testament, all three peek from behind the curtain as early as Genesis 1:1–3.

God the Father is the architect. That's how the Bible begins: “God created.” Specifically, God created the elements out of nothing. This sounds simple, even obvious. Yet every other creation story from the ancient Near East assumes that

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what's eternal is physical matter, not God. The gods merely fashioned preexisting matter into the existing world, like children shaping Play-Doh.

The Bible, however, asserts that God alone is eternal. Hence, the universe is an extension of God, not vice versa. This Christian worldview stands in opposition to all worldviews that assert matter as eternal rather than God. This includes polytheism (multiple gods) and pantheism that sees god in inanimate objects such as wind, waves, or animals. The Christian worldview is also in opposition to Darwinian evolution that replaces the eternal God with eternal "stuff."

The idea that God created the earth is a common core among the monotheistic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. However, there's a factor added by Christians that's absent from other religions: *the Holy Spirit is the engineer*. As we read in Genesis 1:2, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." This Hebrew word "hovering" expresses a vibration. The Spirit "quaked" to bring order out of chaos. It's not dissimilar to a frantic hostess thirty minutes prior to dinner guests arriving. The Spirit was intent on ordering the creation so it would be a life-giving garden.

The Hebrew word for "breath" is also translated "spirit." For example, the breath of God animated Adam in Genesis 2:7. In Genesis 7:22, the word for "breath" is the very word translated "spirit": "Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died."

This is also true of animals, according to Psalm 104:30: "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground." Every animal that has breath is sustained by the Spirit. The Spirit is the ongoing force of God that gives life, breath, and sustaining energy on earth. He's relentlessly, intimately, and perpetually involved in the very fabric of our earthly environment. God the Father *created*; God the Spirit *creates*.

There's a telltale sign when people ignore the Spirit in creation. Namely, the environment becomes a resource to be exploited rather than a gift to be nurtured. The elements become mute, no longer declaring the glory of God (Psalm

19:1–3). We miss God in the thunderstorm and wind, the bloom of a flower, and the majesty of the mountains. Our environmental insensitivities betray our ignorance of the Spirit's continued care for every element of our earth. Consequently, Christians restrict worship to a building on Sunday, rather than worshipping daily in the expanse of the universe, where broader culture has replaced the love of the Spirit with the law of the jungle.

We need to acknowledge the Spirit in creation.

God the Father is the architect. God the Spirit is the engineer. *Jesus is the builder*. He did the heavy lifting during creation. This is seen in Genesis 1:3: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” If we lay that alongside John 1:1–3, we see the mechanics of creation: “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.” This Word, as we learn in verse 14, is none other than Jesus. Even before he came to earth in human form, he was fully God, the embodiment, as it were, of God's spoken word. When God gave the command, Jesus—the Word—turned the command into creation.

The apostle Paul confirmed this:

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. (Colossians 1:15–16)

What happens when we ignore the role of Jesus in creation? Typically, salvation becomes a future spiritual state in heaven rather than an actual earthly reality. We do, of course, have a future in heaven. Nonetheless, Jesus the creator is equally interested in your eternal life here and now.

So there you have it: the Trinity embedded in the first three verses of Genesis. God is the architect, the Spirit is the engineer, and Jesus is the builder. All three are unique and essential to creation. If any of these are ignored, we'll

misunderstand not only the nature of creation but also our own nature and the dignified role God intends for us.

Why Did God Create This World?

Some suggest that God created because he was lonely. That’s impossible to prove and pretty hard to swallow. God had angels in abundance who could communicate, perform, and do who knows how many other things to entertain, serve, and otherwise delight God. Furthermore, God had himself. God is a community—Father, Son, and Spirit. They love, communicate with, and enjoy one another. There’s nothing lacking in God’s own person that required him to create someone to keep him company.

So why *did* God create?

We need look no further than Psalm 102:18 for an answer: “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.” Every generation that God created—from our primal parents in Eden to our own unborn children—has a singular divine purpose: to bring God glory. This shouldn’t come as a shock. The fingerprints of God in our own souls will drive us in the same direction. Why do we dress fashionably? To look good. Why do we decorate our homes? To impress company. Why do we present a gourmet meal with such panache? To please others and receive praise. Isn’t it our internal impulse to create for others’ pleasure and for our own praise? God creates with the same impulse. We’re here for the express purpose of bringing God glory.

When we look at our own genetic complexity, we’re awestruck. The fingerprints of an infant, the structure of our eyes, the electrical synapses of the brain—our bodies are works of art. From Olympic spectacles to ballet, from the NBA to National Geographic, we’re stunned by God’s handiwork.

David expressed it well: “You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). Without speaking a word, even inanimate objects like mountains and rivers and stars and rainbows acclaim their Creator (89:12; 148:3–10). Creation itself is primary proof of God’s exist-

tence (Romans 1:20, 25). By seeing his fingerprints in the world, we're drawn to his self-portrait in the Bible.

Here's where it gets most majestic. We were made to manage the creation of God. "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). We continue God's act of creation. What makes this more amazing—and what raises the stakes—is that God is personally and perpetually involved in creating and recreating this masterpiece of a world with the help of humans. God created the heavens and the earth—he leaves it up to us to make of it a world even more wonderful.

How Did God Restore Creation?

This world is a wreck. It all went south in Genesis 3, when Eve was seduced by the serpent. That moment of indiscretion released a cascade of consequences. None of this took God by surprise. But it did take his breath away. He was distraught over the condition of the creation he so cherished.

This flows into the story of the Flood (Genesis 6–8), when God hit "reset" on the world. God knew this wasn't a permanent fix. As the first couple fell in the garden, so Noah's family failed after the Flood. So, too, Abraham's nation rebelled. But the plan of God all along was to bring a fallen creation back. Notice he began with a couple, then a family, then a nation. And today his mercy extends to all the earth—every tongue, tribe, and nation. The recovery of Eden is the story of the Bible.

The finale, of course, is the story of Jesus. By his blood, Jesus would recreate the human spirit by renewing us through his own Spirit. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We're recreated for good works in Christ (Ephesians 2:10). It's not a quick fix nor an easy solution.

This restoration is not merely for humans but for all creation. Paul expressed it like this:

The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Romans 8:19, 22)

Key Points

- Each member of the Trinity plays a vital role in creation.
- God created for the same reasons we do: for others' pleasure and our own praise.
- Just as God *created* the earth, we're to continue to *recreate* a world, reflecting his love.

MATTHEW 25:41-26 COMMISSION, MATTHEW 28:18-20 27 GOSPEL, MARK 1: 28 FAITH,

This Week

- Day 1:** Read the essay.
- Day 2:** Memorize Genesis 1:1.
- Day 3:** Read Genesis 1–2.
- Day 4:** Meditate on John 1:1; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:15–16.
- Day 5:** Identify one small thing you could do today to help restore Eden where you live.

Overachiever Challenge: Memorize John 1:1.

Bonus Read: Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery*.

MATTHEW 25:41-26 COMMISSION, MATTHEW 28:18-20 27 GOSPEL, MARK 1: 28 FAITH,



Our True Identity

God said, “Let us make man in our image.”

—GENESIS 1:26

Question: What does it mean that I’m created in God’s image?

After God created the heavens and the earth, the seas and its creatures, the birds and the beasts, he capped off creation by shaping a human being from the dust of the earth. This singularly important moment in history is described in detail in Genesis 1:26–27:

God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

As human beings, we have divine attributes. That’s not to say we have God’s abilities, but we do share many of his attributes. This simple observation has

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extraordinary implications. It will change how we view virtually every human activity. So let's dissect this week's core verse to discover who we really are.

God said, "Let *us* make man in our own image." Though the Trinity is a mystery we'll never fully grasp, the least we can say is that God is in community. Though it's tempting to get sidetracked with the spiritual physics of "three in one," let's focus on the subject at hand—not God's nature but human nature. Since God is in community, so are we.

Young adults often leave their families, communities, and traditions to "find themselves." This can get one lost. We'll never know our true selves in isolation. We know ourselves to the extent that we are known. All of us are the sum of our relationships. Though our characteristics are unique, our character is forged on the anvil of our community.

Why does this matter? Because we live in a world that champions individualism in achievements that seldom bring the satisfaction they promise. In terms of the church, this matters because we mistakenly try connecting with God only personally, when we were designed to experience him in community.

Here are some examples of how we've missed the mark:

1. We ask people to accept Jesus as their "personal" Lord and Savior—but the Bible calls us to a kingdom, being built into the body of Christ.
2. Communion becomes the most individualistic event at church, even though the name itself indicates a communal celebration.
3. Bible reading is practiced as a solitary discipline, when in fact the majority of the books in the Bible were written to communities, not individuals.
4. We're often called to pray with "every head bowed and every eye closed." In the Bible, however, prayer was primarily communal. This is true for the church in Acts, for the prayers printed in the epistles, and for the psalms sung in the temple.

Our radical individualism is a denial of our identity. God created us *in* community and *for* community. Without the circles God placed us in, we'd have a shrunken view of self and a self-absorbed view of our purpose and place.

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A second idea that looms large over this week’s core passage is God’s *image*. What precisely might that mean? God is spirit, not flesh, so what kind of characteristics has he placed in us that form our identity?

In order to tease this out with integrity, let’s identify the five primary life forms in the cosmos: divine, angelic, human, animal, and plant. Each has its own set of attributes and abilities. We can, for now, ignore the plants and angels since they aren’t the direct comparison at this point. The chart below, though incomplete, shows a range of characteristics that are partially shared across three life forms.

Divine	Human	Animal
emotion	emotion	emotion
	body	body
	cravings	cravings
	shame	shame
	guilt	
honor	honor	
time	time	
beauty	beauty	
language	language	
love	love	
rule	rule	

Animals, humans, and God all share emotions: joy, affection, sorrow, compassion, etc. Animals and humans share a number of attributes, such as a body that has cravings and the ability to feel shame when not living up to others’ standards. The feeling of guilt, however, is unique to humans. God certainly feels no guilt, nor do animals. They cannot meditate on the past; hence, they lack the capacity for guilt (which may be why none of them feel naked). Then there is a range of capacities that humans share with God but not with animals: honor, time, beauty, language, love, and rule. This, I believe, encompasses the

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“image of God” in us. For the sake of clarity, let’s explore those listed capacities (while recognizing there are certainly others).

Honor is the underlying factor of virtually all our attractions, distractions, and vocations. It’s why we dress up, work hard, and brush our teeth. We *need* (I don’t use this word lightly) to be honored. This should come as no surprise, since the driving force of God’s creation was his desire for honor. This inherent drive gone bad is the fountainhead of all sin. We call it pride. Our divine nature, gone rogue from God’s will, always results in idolatry.

Time is another human construct that derives directly from the nature of God. Though he’s eternal, God brokers in time. That’s why he has aspirations, patience, and strategies. He is aware of the past and has his eye on the future, perhaps experiencing both simultaneously. Therefore, when we execute a vision, schedule something, look at a watch, or anticipate an event, we’re exercising the divine nature in us.

Beauty derives from the divine. From colors to shapes, from sight to taste to sound to smell, we breathe beauty as a spiritual experience. We’re the only animals that make art, set a table for dinner, or rearrange the furniture. No other animal sings. Birds and whales call; they don’t create music. Not only do we create beauty; we also *constantly* create it. We change styles of hair and dress. We write new songs, create new instruments, and invent novel genres. We don’t just tell stories; we create new mediums for those expressions in books, film, plays, musicals, cartoons, sitcoms, etc. Look around you. Unless you’re in the wild, there’s art in some form right now at your fingertips. We seem to be incapable of living without it—as the human archaeological record attests.

Language is another uniquely human feature. From poetry to prose, mathematics to legal debates, we utilize abstract language. A child can imagine a friend who isn’t there and invent a conversation. This ability is why we talk about babies yet unborn. This is the engine driving companies into the future. It inflames our passions, runs our printing presses, and creates romance. Our imagination is a direct reflection of the divine spark in us.

Then there’s *love*. Now, some will argue that animals love, and they’re not wrong. Of course an animal can protect its young. Pets can bond with owners.

But no animal would sacrifice its life for someone it has never met. No animal has ever given sacrificially to victims of an earthquake. No animal empathizes with the loss of a stranger. The noblest feature of our divine humanity is our capacity to love the stranger, the alien, and our enemy.

Finally, the word *rule* expresses humanity's obligation to govern creation. King David composed an entire song about it:

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth! . . .

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet. . . .

O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1, 3–6, 9)

We're caretakers of God's garden. Our created purpose is to enhance what God made. We add our creativity to his creation. We've done that in many ways—through agriculture, art, industry, education, medicine, and technology. God's creation was an environment perfectly designed by him for us, but it wasn't complete without us.

Each of us has a gift, a vision of how to delight God by adding to the creation of the cosmos. Our every creative act, whether musical, architectural, athletic, or intellectual, is thus innately theological. We participate with the Father, who's the architect, by utilizing his raw resources to a greater end. We participate

with the Spirit by engineering environments that sustain and celebrate life. We participate with the Son by building places and spaces where people are restored to God and his creation.

When we fail in this vocation as stewards of God's earth, we find ourselves gravitating to our animalistic attributes of lust, greed, fear, and violence. Consequently, through addiction, poverty, pain, and alienation, we're ruled by the earth rather than being rulers of it. It's for this reason and in this context that Hebrews 2:6–8 cites Psalm 8 in reference to Jesus. He's not only the Savior of the world; he's also the model man who redeemed creation itself. In a sense, he gave us a second lease in Eden to fulfill our divine destiny. Even the Fall couldn't obscure the divine nature!

We can exult over this before God, as David did: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (Psalm 139:14).

Human beings are divinely designed to steward the earth in partnership with God. That's our birthright, which Jesus restored to us by becoming one of us.

Key Points

- Our true identity is found in community, not in individualism.
- God's divine nature in us is exercised in the simplest acts of conversation, art, planning, shared meals, etc.
- Our divine design enables and requires us to participate with God in the ongoing act of creation.

MATTHEW 25:41-26. COMMISSION. MATTHEW 28:18-20 27. GOSPEL. MARK 1: 28. FAITH

This Week

- Day 1:** Read the essay.
- Day 2:** Memorize Genesis 1:26.
- Day 3:** Read Ephesians 1.
- Day 4:** Meditate on Psalm 8:4–5; 139:13–14; Hebrews 2:6–8.
- Day 5:** Identify one area of your life where you're living too individualistically, and invite someone into that area of your life.

Overachiever Challenge: Memorize Psalm 8:4–5.

Bonus Read: John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*.

MATTHEW 25:41-26. COMMISSION. MATTHEW 28:18-20 27. GOSPEL. MARK 1: 28. FAITH



The Fall

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

—GENESIS 3:6

Question: What is my problem?

We've all felt the effects in our souls, like an odor in the room we can't identify or remove. It's called sin in the Bible; it's called psychosis in society.

We all have this brokenness we can't shake or justify. Its effects are justified in the locker room, made legend in movies, and prosecuted in courts of law. From personal offenses to systemic evils, sin has stained the fiber of humanity.

It all started in a garden.

The story is told in Genesis 3. It begins with a naked woman, a talking serpent, forbidden fruit, and a passive husband idly standing by. Eve knew the fruit was off limits. Yet the serpent's seduction won the day. She took the bait in a bite, while her husband stood dumb but not deaf beside her. Her eyes were open to evil, to her naked body, and to the coming curse.

From that ground zero, death crept slowly across humanity.

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Irresistible Temptation

Eve's failure in the garden is neither far removed nor uncommon. This is the shared experience of humanity. So we should probably slow down long enough to ask, "What's my problem?"

First, we should ask what captured Eve's attention, because it's the same thing that captures ours. Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). What seduced her was Satan's half-truth in the previous verse: "You will be like God." That's it! This is the temptation of self-determination—the promise that we can direct our own affairs and determine our own destinies. Pride becomes our Achilles' heel.

Pride isn't merely *a* sin; it's *the* sin. It's the genesis of every murder, theft, lie, adultery, and addiction. Every time, it's at the root of why we prioritize our will over everyone else's good, even God's. That's why the Bible reiterates warnings about pride: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5, NIV; paraphrasing Proverbs 3:34). "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10). The Bible is full of warnings about pride and stories illustrating its catastrophic results. This is a subplot of nearly every book of the Bible, because it's the source of our human condition. Then again, we probably don't need to read it in a book when we all see it in the mirror.

For this reason, we're called to carry a cross, to lay down our lives, and to be crucified with Christ. Self-improvement, self-respect, or self-management won't rescue us from the grip of sin. It's self-extermination—the annihilation of our pride—that can bring us freedom. Perhaps this grates against our culture, which validates pride. But to affirm a disease that ravages one's soul is a cruelty.

No matter how the social pundits spin the freedom of sin, the downward spiral will accelerate until we overcome our pride and submit to the power of God's love.

The story of Eve was summarized thousands of years later by Jesus's best friend, John:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. (1 John 2:15–16)

These three temptations—fleshly desires, visual cravings, and social position—are the core of Satan's arsenal, abetted, of course, by our pride. These are the prides of passion, possession, and position.

These weren't just Eve's temptations (and ours); they enticed Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13). He was tempted by Satan to turn a stone to bread, a form of the lust of the flesh. He was offered all the world's empires for the price of a simple bow; hence, he was tempted by the lust of the eyes. Finally, he was challenged to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple so God would rescue him in the presence of the religious elite, securing their adoration and satisfying the pride of life.

This is not to suggest that Jesus's temptations were the same as ours. After all, Satan was giving Jesus the chance to bypass the cross, escaping human suffering. Yet Jesus's temptations do mirror ours in that Satan's arsenal consistently contains (and is consistently limited to) the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. By understanding Satan's schemes, we can more confidently face his attacks.

Just reading such a solution on paper seems easy. Face to face, however, Satan's deceptive arguments seem convincing.

Strategic Deception

Satan lied to Eve. He said she wouldn't die if she ate the forbidden fruit. Did she die?

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Actually, no—at least, not at that moment. Would she die? Sure. We all do—because of Eve’s choice. The point is that what Satan communicates is seldom entirely fabrication. That would hardly be effective. He’s not going to say squares are round. Any fool could see through that. Rather, he misdirects, misinforms, and misrepresents through half-truths. When he promises pleasure in a bed or a bottle, he holds up his end of the bargain. In the short run, Satan seems sincere. What he holds close to his chest is the trump card of long-term consequences. There’s pleasure in the pursuit of money, in the buzz of a drug, and in the frenzy of popularity. Make no mistake—Satan seldom makes promises he doesn’t initially and partially keep. What he keeps hidden is the price tag. By the time we’ve signed the agreement, the charges on the ticket leave us bankrupt, breathless, and ashamed.

Ask my friend Rick. After multiple affairs while serving in ministry, his secret was exposed and his world was shattered. Only then did he start, in his own words, “turning over the price tags.” One tag had the name of his wife; another, his daughter; another, his ministry; another, his circle of friends. The price tags extended to his grandchildren, his second wife, his calling by God. Had Satan shared with him up front even one or two of the price tags, Rick would never have fallen for such meaningless moments of gratification. In the heat of passion, he never imagined the consequences. Nor do any of us when faced with cheating, pornography, a bad party, a shady business deal, or a simple theft. Only with a decade of hindsight can we recognize the full terms and conditions. The price is as high as our God is holy.

Divine Retribution

God cursed Adam and Eve, both guilty of mutiny. That’s right—it wasn’t merely theft; it was mutiny. God’s wrath rages not for the loss of property but for the full frontal assault on his position. He created this wondrous universe in a matter of days. The loss of one fruit from one tree is hardly a damnable offense. His concern was not trespassing but mutiny.

Eve, eyeing the prospect of becoming like God, took the bait and bit. In that

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momentary indiscretion, it was her divorce from the divine that was so egregious. This lump of flesh, freshly drawn from Adam's side, had the audacity to challenge God's eternal wisdom, his divine plan, his creational genius, and his spiritual authority.

We also commit outrageous sedition when we declare ourselves sovereign. In reality no human has the capacity to manage deification. This is why, of course, emperors and dictators, not to mention local celebrities, implode under the weight of their own arrogance.

For their mutiny, Adam and Eve would have to wear the burden of God's curse, along with their new vestments of animal skins. The serpent would slither in the dust and ultimately be snuffed out by the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:14–15). The woman would bear children through intense pain and be at odds with her husband with little chance of prevailing (verse 16). The man would earn a living only by the sweat of his brow (verses 17–19). Though this may seem harsh, in reality this is discipline more than punishment.

For mutiny, what can we expect but exile? Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden for their own good (verses 22–24). The garden is not our goal; the heart of God is. It does no good to live in the luxury of utopia if one is bereft of character, relationships, and connection to the Creator. It's God himself, not his garden, that's our home. His gifts of procreation and working the garden are meaningless without the fellowship of God in the cool of the day.

We sense this desperate need to fill a spiritual void. It's our exile from Eden that makes our souls cry for reconnection with our Creator. The curse is the very thing that calls us back to our original destination. We return to God through repentance, retracing our steps to submission to our Creator.

Here's the good news, a two-sided golden coin. First, our Creator sent his own son to pay the price to remove the curse. Second, the Son of God sent his Holy Spirit to support us so we can do better than Adam and Eve. Here's the promise: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Key Points

- The core of all sin is pride—that is, the desire for self-determination.
- Sin seduces us in one of three ways: pride of passion, pride of possession, or pride of position.
- Satan deceives with half-truths, not blatant lies.

This Week

- Day 1:** Read the essay.
- Day 2:** Memorize Genesis 3:6.
- Day 3:** Read Genesis 3:1–4:16.
- Day 4:** Meditate on Proverbs 16:18; James 4:6; 1 John 2:15–16.
- Day 5:** If you have unconfessed sin, seek out an accountability partner or mentor. This is the first step back to Eden.

Overachiever Challenge: Memorize James 4:6.

Bonus Read: John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation: Three Classic Works by John Owen*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor.



Covenant

[Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

—GENESIS 15:6

Question: How can I become a part of what God is doing in this world?

Jesus of Nazareth is, without peer, the most influential figure in history. There is, however, one man whom more people look to as the father of their faith. He was an ancient titan named Abraham who became the father of both Judaism and Islam. By extension, he's also the father of the Christian faith. To put that in perspective, 31 percent of the world claims to be Christian; 24 percent, Muslim; and 0.2 percent, Jewish.¹ Hence, nearly three in five people on the planet look to Abraham as the father of their faith.

As Genesis 15:6 says, “[Abram, later renamed Abraham] believed the LORD, and *he counted it to him as righteousness.*” This mantra became the refrain of Abraham’s biography (Romans 4:1–25; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Abraham is the model of faith for every follower of the monotheistic faiths. A synopsis of his story shows why.

God called this man from ancient Iraq to leave his family and his land.

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Because Abram trusted God, he left Mesopotamia and immigrated to Israel, following nothing but the next clue God gave about his future. And there wasn't much to go on. Abram in his nineties had neither biological offspring nor a single square foot of real estate. Yet God promised to make Abraham's descendants a great nation, and Abraham believed that God would be true to his word. Eventually, and against all odds, God fulfilled his promise to Abraham, whose son Isaac had a couple of kids who had a gaggle that became a horde.

A golden strand runs the length of his biography—a promise. That's important today because Christians grasp the other end of that golden strand when we put our faith in Jesus. This promise (in the Bible it's called a covenant) is a legally binding agreement. The concept of covenant undergirds virtually every relationship God ever had with any human. It's essential to understand if you intend to have a working relationship with God. Our faith in Jesus, our connection to the Holy Spirit, our belonging in the body of Christ are all contingent on a covenant.

Here's how it works and how it has always worked with God. A covenant, or testament, is basically an agreement between two parties. Among the ancients was a kind of contract known as a suzerain treaty. The rules were simple: (1) The greater of the two parties established the conditions. (2) These conditions specified the rewards if the contract was kept and the punishment if it was broken. (3) The covenant was typically ratified by a blood sacrifice showing how serious it was. The two parties could walk together between the bisected carcass as a pledge of loyalty to the contract. This appears to be a symbol that the fate of the animal could become the fate of the one who broke the agreement (Jeremiah 34:18).² It had a bit more bite than a handshake. That's precisely what God did with Abraham in Genesis 15:7–21.

Major Covenants in the Bible

The two most important covenants in the Bible make up the Old and New Testaments. The first came through Moses; the second, through Jesus. The Old

Testament includes four other major covenants that were made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David. Obviously, many more details could be added, but this is a sufficient summary:

Covenant	Condition(s)	Blessings	Curses
Adam	abstain from one tree	fellowship with God	death and exile
Noah	build an ark	survival	annihilation
Abraham	circumcision	offspring and land	cut off
Moses	Ten Commandments	land and kingdom	exile
David	fidelity to Yahweh	throne in Israel	divided kingdom
New	fidelity to Jesus	eternal life	damnation

With this template in mind, let’s look specifically at Abraham’s covenant. This will help us mentally map our own covenant in Christ. God made this promise to Abraham:

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. (Genesis 12:2–3)

Look again at the last sentence. It guaranteed that Abraham’s offspring would have a global impact. The question is, How? Most of the Jewish rabbis understood the promise to mean that nations who adopted Israel, who came to her and repented, would be blessed because of their conversion. It was an inward-focused perspective on religion: come to Israel, become Israel, and you’ll be blessed with Israel.

There were some rabbis, however—Jesus among them—who understood the promise of Abraham to be outward focused. Outsiders don’t come to us, but we are to go to them. The earth would be blessed because we leave our homes to go where God leads and to say what God has said. This act of extending the

fame of our God would result in the inclusion of all cultures, not the protection of a single culture. The best Old Testament example of this is Jonah. The prophet Jonah wanted to be inward focused; God forced him to go beyond his own boundaries.

In Romans 11:29 Paul stated, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” God was honor bound to bless Abraham’s son. So when Abraham had a child through Hagar, his wife’s handmaiden, God honored his promise. This is why Ishmael secured a heritage similar to Isaac’s. Both proceeded from the loins of Abraham, the fount of God’s blessings. Even though the Messiah would not come through Ishmael’s lineage, the blessing of God did. God told Abraham,

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. (Genesis 17:20–21)

This has meant a bloody tension ever since. The descendants of Ishmael are one of the peoples most opposed to Jesus the Messiah—the Islamic states of the Middle East. Abraham’s single act of unbelief had permanent consequences we contend with yet today.

When we keep the covenant God’s way, good things happen. When we try to impose our will on God’s, devastating consequences can ensue.

Why Does All This Matter?

In practical terms there are three major implications of all this.

First, *we’re in a covenantal relationship with God*. This implies both responsibility and community. God calls us to be part of a nation, a heritage, a people. We call it the church, but it’s bigger than that. We’re members of a global enterprise—a kingdom—that spans every time zone and all eras. The lineage of

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this kingdom goes back to our father Abraham, whom we follow as an example of faith.

There's more "we" than "me" in our adventure with Jesus. When we lose sight of the covenant, our discipleship can easily deteriorate into rules we keep for God rather than responsibilities we fulfill for the good of his household.

Second, *Jesus fulfills all the previous covenants.*

- The curse of Adam's covenant was removed when Jesus fulfilled the prophecy against the serpent (the devil) that God spoke in Genesis 3:15: "He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."
- Noah's ark was a mere shadow of our salvation imaged in immersion: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).
- Abraham was asked to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac. At the last second, an angel intervened and God provided a ram, so Abraham named the place "The LORD will provide" (Genesis 22:14). This pointed forward to Jesus, the lamb whom God provided.
- Inherent to David's covenant is the promise that his heir will always sit on his throne. Jesus, quoting David's own words, argued that he himself was the king to come: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand'" (Matthew 22:44).
- The night before Jesus died, he connected the covenant of Moses with the new covenant. The Passover lamb was a foreshadowing of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Matthew 26:27–28 memorializes the moment: "He took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is *my blood of the covenant*, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Third, *the condition of every covenant is faith.* Most people define faith as mere belief, particularly irrational belief. According to the Bible, however, faith is not a leap in the dark but a walk in the light. Because God had demonstrated his fidelity, Abram gave his loyalty. That's faith!

Here's a simple exercise that could transform your vision and practice of faith. Every time you read the word *faith* in the Bible, replace it with the word *faithful*. This will make the passage clearer almost every time. For example, let's go back and reword this week's core verse: "[Abram] *was faithful to the LORD*, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

Or think in terms of a husband and wife (another covenant relationship): if a husband says, "I have faith in my wife," it's a compliment; if he says, "I'm faithful to my wife," it's a commitment.

Faith fluctuates with our emotions and our circumstances. Faithfulness stands unflinchingly on promises. We keep our promises because of the love we have for the character of the one to whom we pledged our loyalty. Your character is only as deep as the covenant you keep. That's true in business, in marriage, in foreign policy, and certainly in our relationship with God. Keep the faith!

Key Points

- Abraham's trust (faith) in God is the model of fidelity for Christians today.
- A covenant is an agreement between two parties that includes conditions, terms, and consequences.
- Every previous covenant in the Bible is fulfilled by Jesus.

AS THE CROSSHAT THEY HAD TO CELEBRATION MATTHEW 28:19-20 SUPERNATURAL
MATTHEW 25:41 26. COMMISSION, MATTHEW 28:18-20 27. GOSPEL, MARK 11: 28. FAITH

This Week

- Day 1:** Read the essay.
- Day 2:** Memorize Genesis 15:6.
- Day 3:** Read Genesis 21:1–22:18.
- Day 4:** Meditate on Genesis 12:1–9; Romans 4; Galatians 3:6.
- Day 5:** Read Romans 3:21–31, replacing the word *faith* with *faithfulness*.

Overachiever Challenge: Memorize Galatians 3:6.

Bonus Read: Mont W. Smith, *What the Bible Says About Covenant*.

AS THE CROSSHAT THEY HAD TO CELEBRATION MATTHEW 28:19-20 SUPERNATURAL
MATTHEW 25:41 26. COMMISSION, MATTHEW 28:18-20 27. GOSPEL, MARK 11: 28. FAITH