



JESUS



God

Bible

Suffering

Jesus

Faith

BC is a series of five studies that parallel a faith journey toward Jesus Christ. Each builds on the one before, and interested readers will find themselves somewhere on the path.

This fourth study assumes the existence of God and relevance of the Bible, and uses the Bible to reconcile our suffering with a good God and explain God's compassionate answer to our needs.

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“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”
John 6:68-69

Jesus Christ is unique. No single individual has had a more profound effect upon humanity. Millions of people have believed him to be the divine Creator dwelling in human flesh, able to reconcile mankind with God. These believers have included people of all kinds, from slaves to heads of state, from serfs and laborers to artists and great scientists. No other figure has proven so compelling to people of every race, nationality, language, age and century. While his followers have often been divided and divisive, Jesus himself is a man not only for all seasons but all cultures and all times. As the third millennia of his ministry begins, his followers are multiplying all over the world as never before.

Jesus’ uniqueness, however, goes back much further than the 2,000 years since his birth. The importance of all that Jesus Christ began stems from all that he finished when he originally came.

When opening the Scriptures to study their record of Christ, it is common for people to turn to the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. But these narratives of Jesus’ life and work are the climax of an epic history stretching back to the beginning of the human race. It is in that story, called the Old Testament, that we find all the threads which come together in Jesus. The New Testament bonds to the Old like Velcro; the fibers of each designed to hook into the other. It is as if all the biblical authors over all the centuries were guided by one Author intent on telling one grand story, a story that stretches from a final climactic vision of the future all the way back to the first recorded prophecy of all time ...

The Promise

The beginning of Genesis is an outline of the entire Bible to come. Its first three chapters describe the origin of the human race, its purpose, tragedy and hope of redemption.¹

To summarize this introduction: God created humanity with a purpose. The first pair were called to give birth to a vast family exercising responsible dominion over the earth in a way that glorifies God's character, intelligence and artistic skill. Instead, they set a very different course for their posterity, purposefully heeding the seductive suggestion to grab for dominion independently from God. Living apart from God is what the Bible calls sin. Human sin resulted in a just but terrible divine judgment: God left humanity to its own devices. This separation from the true and living God resulted in a general decay of humanity's dominion, health, emotional and social stability, and ultimately the phenomenon of death.

The Bible understands death far differently than modern secularized man. The popular modern view holds that a human being is 100% physical, a collection of atoms with no inherent meaning—biological systems that cease functioning (die) without ever having any real significance at all. In contrast, the Bible asserts that a human being is a combination of the physical with the spiritual, a body joined with a soul by a personal God who gives meaning and purpose. Separation from God results in the deterioration of both body and soul until they tear apart from each other (death). Neither the physical atoms nor the spiritual soul of any individual ceases to exist, and the Bible warns that when this phase of human history is completed, body and soul will be reunited so that every human being will continue on forever, either eternally dead (separated from God) or eternally alive (reconciled to him).

Having initially explained why death dominates our experience today, the rest of the Bible goes on to trace a plan of reconciliation (life) set in motion by God at the very beginning.

This one verse provides the interpretive key to the entire Old Testament, just as the Old Testament claims to be the interpretive key to human experience. The Bible sees all of human history as a working out of God's promise of reconciliation—a promise that God will reconcile himself with a group of people drawn from the larger human family. As the Bible's story progresses, we come to understand that this family will include every ethnic flavor of mankind, and that being "born" into this family is not a matter of race, but rather a matter of personal faith.

Starting in the next chapter, the story unfolds as succeeding generations divide into two distinct streams, the smaller one associated with faith and the prophecy of God's blessing. Throughout the Old Testament, this redemptive stream is represented by a single genealogical line. Abel trusts in God, not Cain. Seth replaces Abel, and the line starts again. This "covenant line" is traced down to Noah, where again, it starts over. Wherever there is a genealogical fork in the road, the text always makes clear which descendent is the "woman's offspring" who carries on God's promise of reconciliation.

Genesis and the rest of the Bible include many fascinating stories. They are, however, more than an anthology of ethnic literature. They are tied together over many centuries by a single purpose. The Old Testament was written to trace the survival and the adventures of one particular family line, the line associated with God's promise of salvation.

"he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." The prophecy of Genesis 3:15 ends with a dramatic twist. Suddenly, "the offspring of the woman" are all represented by a masculine singular, "he." Eventually, one specific individual represents everyone who will ever be reconciled to God. Apparently, reconciliation with God is something that must be accomplished by somebody in particular. This special somebody will single-handedly destroy the Devil's influence through a victory that comes at great personal cost. He must, as it were, brave deadly venom to accomplish his work.

The oldest biblical prophecy on record, then, is a promise of life, a promise of reconciliation with God. While Adam and Eve's children continue in their parents' sinful ways, God will always remember his vow to reawaken the hearts of many to trust him again. Ultimately, he will destroy Satan's work through a single individual who is willing to face personal suffering in order to bring people back to God.

That is the promise. Further defining it, exploring it and illustrating it becomes the unifying theme of the Old Testament.

The Promise Unfolds

The early chapters of Genesis throw a searchlight through the mists of an otherwise unrecorded past to illuminate an ancient promise of salvation from sin and death. Beginning in Chapter 12, this story merges with the common written history of humanity, including people and events often mentioned outside of the Bible.

This epic story of one family eventually becomes the history of the family-nation of Israel. Unlike most other histories, however, the point of the narrative is never how wonderful these people are (with all respect, they are as disappointing as the rest of us). The point is rather how God progressively reveals to them more and more about himself, and the coming one who will sacrifice himself to reconcile many with God.

The Lord used this family-nation as a brush on the canvas of history to paint a lavish and colorful picture of the coming Savior and his work.³ Scattered throughout Old Testament history are repeated historical models of this Champion and his victory. There is Noah and the ark, in which one faithful person brings humanity through God's righteous judgment. There is the covenant with Abraham, in which God vows to personally stand in a pool of his own blood in order to fulfill his promises. There is Moses, a servant who delivers God's chosen people from slavery to a Promised Land through a Passover sacrifice. There are a series of Judges who single-handedly achieve victory and deliverance.

There is King David, the shepherd who establishes a kingdom to glorify God. In addition to these living political models, God also provided Israel with prophets and with a carefully crafted priestly system in the Temple.

Even the Temple itself was a model, architecturally designed to illustrate how the coming representative of the woman's seed would reconcile humanity to God.⁴ Its architecture preached that the Lord could be approached only by a single High Priest who offered a perfect substitutionary sacrifice to satisfy God's just wrath against human sin. That way, God's holiness could be honored even as sinners were forgiven. The prophets delivered divine explanations of these historical models, and the authenticity of their explanations was vindicated by miraculous signs—often including the prediction of future events.

The most striking predictions of all were those that directly spoke of the Champion himself. He was prophesied to be God on earth, a divine shepherd who would come to care for his flock.⁵ It was foretold that he would be born in Bethlehem⁶ and teach in Israel's northern area, called Galilee.⁷ He would preach the Word of God,⁸ enter Jerusalem on a donkey's colt,⁹ and suffer so as to literally bear the sins of many.¹⁰ Ultimately, he would reign as King over God's eternal kingdom,¹¹ and thus fulfill all that the Old Testament prophets, priests and kings modeled. Because each of those Hebrew officers were set apart by anointing, the promised Champion was called the anointed one—"Messiah" in Hebrew—"Christ" when the word was translated into the Greek.

Through the laws and customs God gave Israel and through the way he shaped their history, the cryptic promise of Genesis 3:15 was carved out in great detail. And all the while, the genealogy went on, link by link, toward its climax in the Champion of the "woman's seed."¹²

However, while the Old Testament ends with its genealogy intact, it is unfinished. A picture of the promised Christ had been drawn, but he himself was yet to appear.

The Promise Fulfilled

The New Testament makes its principal point in its very first chapter, where Matthew declares the great genealogy to be complete.¹³ Consider the significance of this rather amazing fact: Jesus Christ is the only person who has a complete connected genealogy going back to the beginning of the human race!¹⁴ Everyone must have such an ancestry, of course. The point is that only Christ's has been recorded, and recorded specifically as a fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. No other religious figure, no other human being for that matter, can make such a claim. If God did, indeed, originally promise to overcome the human tragedy of sin and death, that Savior simply *has* to be Jesus Christ. But how do we know that this story of a fulfilled promise is any more than just a story?

Jesus was vindicated the same way God vindicated those who prepared for his arrival, through miracles. In this regard, it is important to appreciate the purpose of miracles. Contrary to popular thinking, biblical miracles were not performed to stimulate faith.¹⁵ Neither were they supposed to be a normal way of life for those who believe. Miracles were highly abnormal events which provided an objective basis for recognizing divine revelation. Miracles were unusual and dramatic "attesting signs" which demonstrated the authenticity of God's prophets.¹⁶ With the final prophetic work of Jesus' apostles, the need for such signs has passed.¹⁷

Jesus' miracles take on a whole new dimension when they are understood as linking him with the Old Testament promise. Jesus did not heal, or multiply loaves or raise the dead just because they were neat things to do. Each miracle intelligently identified him with an Old Testament theme or a figure who modeled him in the past. They underscored that he was the one prophesied to fulfill God's ancient promise of reconciliation. He was, in fact, God incarnate (in human flesh), come to fulfill that promise personally.¹⁸

The miracles pointed to Jesus' authenticity, and his teaching illuminated the Old Testament's meaning. But none of that actually overcame the alienation that severed us from God and condemned us to death. That happened at the cross and the empty tomb.

Christ's cross was a judicial execution, a condemnation by both Jews and Gentiles together. The Bible discloses, however, that it was much more than that. As a fulfillment of God's promise to reconcile a people to himself, God took human form in the Person of Jesus and willingly accepted the condemnation of crucifixion.¹⁹ On the cross, God-in-the-flesh took upon himself the kind of condemnation justly earned by an erring humanity. As a human being, God became a substitute for all the "woman's seed," bearing the divine judgment and death they deserved.²⁰ Thus, a way became clear for God to reconcile sinners to himself, and still remain a righteous God who will not tolerate sin.²¹

Jesus' work did not end with the cross, however. On the third day after his death, he rose again. In his resurrection, Christ vindicated the effectiveness of the cross²² and personally inaugurated a new humanity reconciled with our Creator.²³ With the just condemnation of sin vicariously accomplished, the way was clear to begin healing souls—souls of people now reconciled to God through faith in Christ.

This new humanity continues to multiply through the sharing of faith so that "the woman's offspring" increasingly includes people of every possible ethnic background.²⁴ The history we all learn in history books, while important, is just a backdrop for the outworking of this great redemption around the world, as the risen Jesus personally calls person after person to be "reborn" by faith into God's family through faith. When this family of faith is complete to God's satisfaction, the Bible clearly states that Jesus will return in person to end this phase of history and move mankind forward into its eternal destiny.

The Promise Considered

What a story, and one that claims to be entirely true!²⁵ Christianity rests this claim on actual history, most especially on the historical event of Christ's cross and resurrection.²⁶ The Christian faith, therefore, is not about a pretend story concocted to make us feel better, but a true story of what God is actually accomplishing in time and space.

The last booklet in this series will go on to address the issue of faith and what faith involves. This discussion comes now to a close with the simple observation that Jesus Christ is worthy of our serious scrutiny.

Why? Because the Old Testament deals with the human condition like no other book. Buddhism and Hinduism are cultural philosophies; nature religions and the New Age are subjective points of view. By contrast, the Old Testament reveals an objective God who acts in history.

And the initial prophecy that gave the Old Testament its form and purpose could only be fulfilled by one individual—not Moses, not Mohammed—but Jesus Christ. He was the last link in the carefully preserved genealogical chain of the “woman's offspring,” the *only* possible candidate to fulfill God's ancient promise of redemption. He alone did what needed to be done to overcome the barrier of guilt and moral failure that would otherwise forever separate us from a holy God. He alone conquered death. In him, our alienation from God can end and real life can begin.

There is good, intelligent reason to pursue faith in Christ, however long it takes to find him and whatever that requires.

Of course, there are plenty of other options if all we want is a religion to comfort us. If “God” is merely a creation of our own minds or culture, then it doesn't really matter what philosophy we hang on the wall while we wait to die and be forgotten.

Jesus Christ uniquely represents the alternative. His is the story of a Creator who invested us with purpose. When humanity

rejected that purpose, God personally stepped in to offer us a way back.

Biblical faith is hard to swallow. It requires death to the way of thinking and living we are used to. It requires trust in a God who has every reason to condemn us. It requires faith in the life and love of someone who died two millennia ago.

Jesus' first disciples understood all this. When others went off to look for other options, Jesus asked them if they wanted to leave, too. Peter's answer says it all ...

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”
John 6:68-69

As challenging as this story sounds, Jesus Christ remains the *only* rational hope the world has ever known.

If this makes sense, then the only question left is what faith in Christ would mean for me? How can I become part of Christ's story?

The last pamphlet in this series is entitled “Faith,” and explores what it means to personally believe and follow Jesus Christ.

(Endnotes)

- 1 These themes are explored in greater depth in a companion booklet entitled, *Suffering*.
- 2 John 8:42-44.
- 3 Luke 24:36-47; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11; 1 Peter 1:10-12.
- 4 The key element of the Tabernacle/Temple was its “pattern,” cf. Exodus 25:9,40. A good place to begin studying the significance of this pattern is Hebrews 8-10.
- 5 Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34 (John 10:1-18).
- 6 Micah 5:2 (cf. Matthew 2:1-6).
- 7 Isaiah 9:1-7 (Matthew 4:13-16).

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- 8 Isaiah 11:1-5; 61:1-3 (cf. Luke 4:14-21)
- 9 Zechariah 9:9 (cf. John 12:12-16).
- 10 Isaiah 53; also Psalm 22 (Acts 8:26-35; 1 Peter 2:21-25).
- 11 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23-31; Hebrews 1:1-5).
- 12 Analysis of Old Testament patterns make it clear that its genealogies are recorded in compressed form. That is, “X was the son of Y” might well mean that X was the great grandson of Y. The point was to representatively connect a complete genealogy. As a result, the total timeline represented may go back 10,000 years or more.
- 13 The Gospel of Matthew was written largely for a Jewish audience, and so concentrates on the genealogy only back to Abraham. The Gospel of Luke completes the entire connection back to Adam (cf. Luke 3).
- 14 Biblical genealogies did not attempt to record every link, but encapsulated large chunks of time by simply connecting highlighted individuals in the chain. Hence, Jesus could be called “the son of David,” skipping a number of generations in between but still keeping the chain connected.
- 15 Jesus specifically renounced such a practice, Matthew 12:39; 16:4.
- 16 cf. Exodus 4:1-9 (and all the miracles to follow); 1 Kings 18:16-39; John 14:11 (especially the resurrection); 2 Corinthians 12:12. The point of miracles is to give objective evidence that a speaker is from God. Such evidence, however, does not necessarily stimulate faith in the hearers. Faith is as much a moral issue as it is an intellectual one. Biblical miracles point the way to reconciliation with God; they do not make anyone desire the journey.
- 17 cf. Hebrews 1:1-3; Revelation 22:18-19. Please note that God still exercises sovereign power as much today as ever. There is simply no longer any need for dramatic flashes of the supernatural on command in order to highlight his spokesman. The message of Christ is complete and his resurrection is the ultimate attesting sign.
- 18 Isaiah 40:1-11; 59:9-20 (cf. Mark 1:1-4; John 1:1-18).
- 19 Philippians 2:5-11.
- 20 Corinthians 5:19-21; 1 Peter 2:21-25 (cf. Isaiah 53).
- 21 Romans 3:21-26.
- 22 see again 1 Corinthians 15:12-58

23 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2.

24 Revelation 5:9-10. The Bible is very clear that the people of God will be completely multi-ethnic, so as to demonstrate that our self-centered pride has nothing to do with our salvation, which is based entirely on God's grace and love.

25 John 3:31-33; 18:37

26 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 ff.