



THE *Runaway* BRIDE

IF GOD IS SO GOOD, WHY IS THE WORLD SO MESSED UP?



Charlie Boyd
Teaching Pastor

This booklet you are holding in your hand can literally change your life. We've all wondered about the purpose of life and why we're here. What if I told you that you can understand the most important answer to these questions in under one hour? You can, because that's all it will take for you to read through this booklet and find out what God's plan has always been for your life.

I don't know where you are at this point in your life, but I do know that this booklet can help you reconsider for what and who you are living. I pray that what you're about to read will help you discover the life you were always meant to have.

cboyd@fellowshipgreenville.org

864.234.7033 x1200

What's Christianity all about?

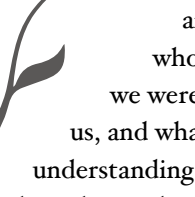
Every day, our televisions, radios, web sites, social media feeds, and magazines pour out a steady stream of tragedy, disaster, selfishness and stupidity. There is so much wrong in our world today that we get to the point where our eyes glaze over and our hearts grow numb with “compassion fatigue.” But every once in a while, a tragic story grips us—especially when it hits close to home—and the old questions return.

HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN? HOW COULD GOD LET THIS HAPPEN?
IF THERE IS A GOOD AND POWERFUL GOD, THEN WHY IS THE
WORLD IN SUCH A MESS? WHY DOESN'T HE DO SOMETHING?

I believe these are the questions people are wrestling with today—believers and non-believers alike. For some, the recent acts of violence across our world are further reason that they have chosen to deny God's existence—they cannot imagine a God who would allow such misery. This question is a very real obstacle to faith, and I want to address the question as honestly and straightforwardly as I can.

To answer this question, we really need to go back to the beginning of time and look at why God created people





and what he wanted for this world when the whole thing began. The Bible shows us what we were created for, what happened that changed us, and what the consequences have been. And in understanding the storyline of the Bible, we get some clues about what is going on in our world and what God is doing about it.

Creation

In the beginning life began with God. God created the world and everything in it. He created people to live in perfect harmony, in an intimate relationship with God and with each other. He designed life to be shared, so he created people as male and female, who together would bear and reflect his image. He put people in charge of the world—to rule it, cultivate it, be responsible for it, and enjoy all its beauty and goodness.

PEOPLE WERE TO SERVE AS CARETAKERS OF THE EARTH, BUT ALWAYS UNDER GOD'S AUTHORITY, HONORING HIM, AND OBEYING HIS DIRECTIONS.

God was delighted with the world he had created. We're told that he stood back and looked at "all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). But it didn't stay very good for long, as we can clearly see today.

But for just a moment, *imagine a world in which...*

- » there is no bad news on the radio and TV
- » no one lying, cheating, stealing
- » no adultery, no abuse, no perversion, no prejudice, no violence, no war
- » no relational conflicts of any kind, none!



Imagine a world where...

- » marriages are strong and children are secure
- » no one goes to bed hungry at night and everyone goes to sleep in their own bed
- » nations and races treasure differences as attractive, important, complementary
- » government officials tell the truth and freely praise the accomplishments of other public officials
- » business associates rejoice when someone else is promoted
- » people do not cut each other off in traffic

Imagine a world where...

- » people stimulate and encourage one another's virtues and creativity
- » newspapers are filled with well-written accounts of great moral beauty
- » at the end of the day, people sit on their porches to read the news and savor it, even call each other about it.

Above all, imagine a world where God resides in unspeakable beauty over all people—people who dwell with God and each other in peace and harmony. *That* was God's intention for us.¹ But this isn't life as we know it. Why not?

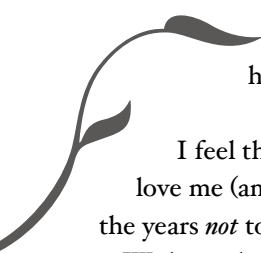
Because the story took a tragic twist.



You see, God desired to love and be loved by the people he had created. So a very important part of the way God designed people was that he gave us the capacity to choose. God preferred to create, work with, care for, and enjoy the company of human beings who would have the power to *choose* to return love, or to turn against it and mistreat others. We could choose to follow his design for life or go our own way.

HE CONFERRED UPON US THE DIGNITY OF MAKING REAL CHOICES WITH REAL CONSEQUENCES. IN OTHER WORDS, THE CHARACTERS IN GOD'S STORY DECIDED TO WRITE THEIR OWN SCRIPT.

This ability to choose was extremely important because God didn't want to create a race of robots who can't genuinely love. Love is meaningful only when it is free and not coerced.² I mean, I can love you—and love you with all my heart—but I can't make you love me, and God chose to not use his power to force us to love him either. Of course, this sort of freedom carried with it the possibility that God's love would not be returned. But for the sacred romance to be true, God structured an environment where people would have to choose to love him and follow him among real options. That was part of his original design and



he has never wavered from it.

Look at it this way: my wife loves me and I feel that love because she has the option to *not* love me (and I've given her plenty of reasons through the years *not* to love me), but she chooses to love me anyway. Without the choice, it wouldn't mean anything. I want someone to love me because she *wants* to. That's how God made things to work.

The Bible tells us that at some point, the first humans—Adam and Eve—sought love and care outside of God. In rebellion they tried to be equal with God. They wanted to call the shots. (We all do that don't we? We don't like someone telling us what to do or how to live.) They even questioned his goodness. And in not remaining true to God, they failed to love him. They ignored his design, deciding to try and make it on their own.

The moment they disobeyed, they came to know good and evil, but from the wrong side of the divide. God told them if they turned away from him they would die—both spiritually and physically. Once mortal, they realized the evil of which we are all capable. They became self-aware, in the negative sense—self-protecting, self-centered, and driven to self-preservation. Life as they knew it changed.

From that point on, all their relationships—to God, to nature, to one another, and to themselves—became dis-

torted. They moved from living in a pure, open relationship with their Creator and one another to living in suspicion and fear. They exchanged eternal life with God for the sentence of slow, but certain, death.

From this new awareness of evil springs the first family murder and ultimately society, as a whole, came to rely on violence as a way of life, to satisfy selfish desires. The whole world began to be filled with people bent on doing what suited them. The harmonious goodness of the original creation disintegrated, deteriorated, and died.

Ever since then, generation after generation, the original rebellion has lived on; people continue to defy God's guidance, reject his love, and prefer their own ways. These choices have had personal and global effects.

WHAT THIS MEANS IS THAT LIFE, AS WE CURRENTLY KNOW IT,
IS NOT THE WAY IT WAS CREATED TO BE.

Sin and death have crippled us. Alienation has replaced intimacy with God. Human relationships are plagued by selfishness, pain, and suffering—all characteristics of the twisted nature found inside us. Even our physical surroundings display the wounds of a world at odds with its Creator. Our planet is in a state of dysfunction and disaster. Injustice, disease, and death surround us, but it wasn't meant to be like this.



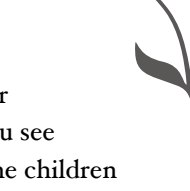
THERE IS SOMETHING TERRIBLY WRONG WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE.
BUT GOD IS NOT DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MESS.
WE CAN'T POINT THE FINGER AT HIM.

The suffering and injustice we see all around us can only be traced back to our asserting independence from God; it's the result of our insisting on living our lives and leaving God out. What we see in the world is breaking the heart of our Creator God who wanted so much more for those he loves.

Rebecca Pippert writes, "Just imagine for a moment that you are God. That shouldn't be too hard to pull off—we pretend it all the time. Imagine the picture you had in mind as you created planet Earth. Your desire, I would bet, was that your human creatures should live in harmony with you and one another. But then imagine that the universe that was your creation, chose not to go your way. We human beings decided, in other words, that we didn't want you to be the center of our existence. So you've been compelled to watch generation after generation, century after century, as people pollute and destroy nature, nations, one another, and themselves.

"You are now watching the entire globe at war. You see that we use the gifts you gave us—our intelligence and imagination, tools that were created for good purposes—to destroy one another.

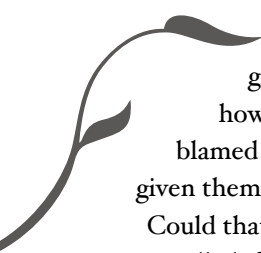




You see human brilliance and skill used so fiendishly as to defy comprehension. You watch the Crusades carried out in your name, killing every living thing in sight. You see the Holocaust—human beings shoveling the children of other human beings into gas chambers, using babies as target practice. You see bright, alert, young minds drugging themselves into oblivion. You watch us laboring earnestly to create tools that will obliterate the planet. But does your creation pause to think, let alone weep and kneel and ask forgiveness? On the contrary. We blame you.”³

Wow! We really don’t think much about how God feels as he watches his kids ruin the world he created. Imagine, again with me, what it would be like to build a nationally-known business from the ground up. Your product is in high demand and you have tremendous customer service. People come from all over to do business with you. You receive awards for your entrepreneurial creativity and innovation, which is great because you have poured your heart into the business and take great pride in it.

But one day, you decide its time to share this business with your son and daughter. When they come of age, and after a brief time of helping them learn the ropes, you turn the whole thing over to them. Things are fine for a while, but then in a few months, they run the business into the



ground and practically bankrupt you. Now how would you feel, if they turned around and blamed you, saying that you should have never given them the business to start with?

Could that be the way God feels about us? Hurt, angry, appalled, feeling like a spurned lover? But what is so unlike us is that God continues to love us. We can't imagine taking an unfaithful lover back, especially a repeat offender, but God has never given up trying to win us back.

EVEN THOUGH WE BLAME HIM FOR THE MESS WE MADE,
GOD DOES NOT ABANDON US. INSTEAD, HE GIVES US
A PROMISE OF LIFE.

Long ago, God promised to send One who would remove our death sentence and erase the shame of our betrayal. This coming One would set us free from our slavery to self and make possible the life God wanted for us from the beginning.

God conveyed this promise over time through a family, instruction, poetry, and prophets, as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those who longed for life waited with anticipation for their promised One, the Messiah, to come.

Christ

The first four books in the New Testament are biographies of this promised One, Jesus. But Jesus did not have the career that Jews of the first-century Palestine expected the Messiah to have. Yes, he worked miracles that showed supernatural power at work in his life. Yes, he aligned himself with the Scriptures and taught as a respected rabbi. Yes, he seemed to have considerable personal charisma, speaking with extraordinary authority. But Jesus failed to be the Messiah that people wanted. In fact, he seemed largely uninterested in being the Messiah of people's expectations. He did not free his people from their bondage to Roman oppression. He did not set up an independent kingdom to restore the glories of King David. He had virtually nothing to do with politics until his own trial and execution. And he was executed by the state—*some Messiah!* He looked nothing like the one they longed for.

Even today, Jesus doesn't look like what many people want in a Savior. He doesn't offer to free us *immediately* from all oppression and injustice. He doesn't offer to make us financially secure. He doesn't provide us with endless comfort and pleasure,⁴ making our lives all we want them to be.

So what does he offer? What did God do in sending

Jesus, and what does Jesus have to do with the problem of sin, suffering, and evil in the world?

In order to show us that he had not given up on us, God became one of us in the person of Jesus. God entered human history—up close and personal—to show us the greatness of his love.

A story is told of a king who loved a beautiful maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared to breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden.

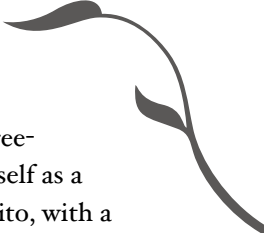
How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her with jewels, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How could he know?

If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a

lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf





between them.

The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her cottage incognito, with a worn cloak fluttering loosely about him. It was not mere disguise, but a new identity he took on. He renounced the throne to win her hand.⁵

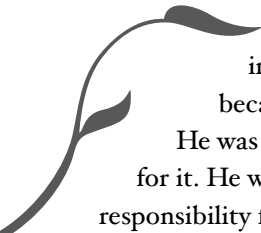
You see, in his dealing with human beings, God humbled himself like this. Why? Because God desires what power can never win. He is a king who doesn't simply want subservience. He wants our love.

As far as the Bible is concerned, Jesus was and is the human face of God. God with skin on. God “with us.” Jesus was not just a messenger from God, a prophet of God, or just a great-spirited teacher and example. He *was* God.⁶

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT GOD IS REALLY LIKE, LOOK AT JESUS. IN JESUS WE SEE GOD CLOSE TO US, ACTIVE AMONG US, LOVING US, CARING FOR US, FORGIVING OUR SIN, AND OPENING UP A WAY BACK TO THE LIFE HE PROMISED AT THE BEGINNING.

So—and this is where it gets a little deep—if Jesus *was* God, then God experienced firsthand, to the fullest extent, what we suffer in this fallen world.

Jesus experienced as difficult a life as anyone could



imagine. He came into this world in a barn, because no “proper” rooms could be found.

He was born out of wedlock, and likely ridiculed for it. He was the eldest son and the weight of family responsibility fell on him. He knew poverty, temptation, persecution, and rejection by the people he loved and came to rescue. He lived in an occupied and oppressed nation. He was mocked and ridiculed, and at one point his own family thought he had lost his mind. Jesus experienced all our pain and suffering first-hand, and he died as the innocent victim of a violent mob, after being falsely accused by his enemies and abandoned by his friends.

Dorothy Sayers makes this point well: “For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he [God] had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.”⁷

IN JESUS, WE SEE A GOD WHO LOVES US SO MUCH,
HE WAS WILLING TO SUFFER AT THE VERY HANDS OF THE PEOPLE
HE LOVED AND HAD COME TO SAVE.

Jesus shows us what God is like. But Jesus shows us something else; Jesus also shows us what God intended for us to be like.

Jesus was a radical. He challenged the status quo of his time in all kinds of ways. To violent revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow their Roman oppressors, he said, “Love your enemies.” To men happy with easy divorce laws (easy for men, that is), Jesus declared that the Creator’s will for marriage is one man to woman *for life*. (Even his disciples thought that was going too far.)

Jesus shocked the rich with his words about feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked. Jesus demonstrated a special interest in the disabled, children, drunks, prostitutes, prisoners, and lepers. This went counter to religious teaching at the time, who considered all these unclean. People like this were even forbidden to be active in the religion of the day. Jesus actually commands the members of his new community to specifically invite these people: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13). They are all welcome at God’s table.

In Jesus' day, it was a scandal for a man to appear in public with a woman. The rabbis taught it was better to burn a copy of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) than to allow a woman to touch it. Women were excluded from most parts of the temple. First-century Jewish men regularly thanked God that they were not Gentiles, slaves, or women. But Jesus appeared with women in public (John 4:27), and taught them theology (Luke 10:38-42). He allowed a woman who was a known sinner to wash his feet with her tears, wipe them with her long hair, kiss and perfume them—all in public. Absolutely scandalous.

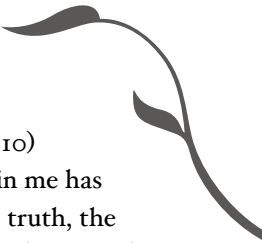
Jesus confronted hypocrisy, oppression, injustice, racism—even religion. He embraced the poor, the despised, and the rejected, and reached out to the powerless and privileged alike. Jesus perfectly modeled servanthood and self-sacrifice. How different this world would be if humanity lived out what Jesus taught.

But here's the most important thing you need to understand about Jesus and what he taught.

JESUS CAME TO OFFER US A SECOND CHANCE AT THE EXACT SAME THING GOD OFFERED AT CREATION.

He offered eternal life—life forever with God and with others who love God—and he offered himself as the way back.



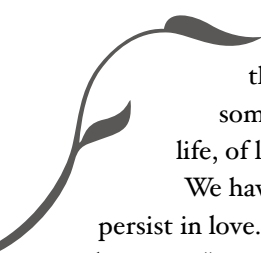


He stated this plainly on several occasions: “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10) “I tell you the truth, the one who believes in me has eternal life.” (John 6:47) “I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes to the Father but by me.” (John 14:6)

But *how* would Jesus make that life possible? Because we live under the sentence of death, he died in our place so we could live. In dying for us, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and removed the offense that separated us from God. His death on our behalf secured forgiveness for us.

SOMETHING DEEP IN OUR SOULS KNOWS SUBSTITUTION IS THE MEANING OF LIFE. WHENEVER YOU GET NEAR IT IN A STORY, YOU SEE UNDENIABLE LOVE.

Did you see the movie, *The Last of the Mohicans*? When the women are about to be killed, Nathaniel Poe (played by Daniel Day-Lewis) comes walking into camp and says to the Indian chief, “Me for her. Me for them.” He’s trying to communicate, “Kill me instead of them,” but he doesn’t know their language. So he has to speak through an interpreter. The interpreter is Duncan, the rejected suitor of one of the young women. Duncan starts speaking, but he says, “*Me* for them.” At the shock and amazement of everyone, they take Duncan, tie him up, and kill him. And



the others go free. When you watch that, something moves you. *This* is the meaning of life, of love.

We have chosen sin, and God has chosen to persist in love. Sin is “me first,” whereas the love of God’s salvation is “you first.” The essence of sin is “your life for mine” but the essence of salvation is Jesus saying, “my life for yours.”

WHEN JESUS CHRIST WAS DYING ON THE CROSS,
IT WAS THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF GOD’S LOVE FOR US.
THIS IS HOW FAR GOD HAS GONE TO WIN US BACK.

John Stott said, “For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserve to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”⁸

You see, when a wrong has been committed, someone has to pay. When the offender pays, justice is served. When forgiveness is offered, mercy and grace are extended, but the offended party actually pays the price. Forgiveness always costs the one who does the forgiving.

It's like this, let's say I owe you \$1,000 but cannot pay you back. You can take me to court and try to *make* me pay you, but if I don't have the money, I don't have the money. So, you can press charges and have me punished in prison for failing to pay my debt. But you aren't any richer for doing so, are you? My going to prison might quench your thirst for revenge, but it doesn't deal with the debt.

Your other choice is to forgive the loan. What this means, strictly speaking, is that you pay the \$1,000 on my behalf. No responsible bookkeeping in the world is going to make such a transaction "zero out." You'll always have a net loss of \$1,000. What you have done, though, is remove my name from the list of debtors and taken the loss yourself.

When Jesus died on the cross, God took the loss himself. On the cross, it was God absorbing the pain, God bearing the shame,⁹ God paying the price himself, then opening up his arms to us and inviting us to come home.

But the good news gets better. Jesus didn't stay dead.

HE WAS NOT JUST A GREAT MORAL TEACHER WHO ENDED UP A MARTYR. THREE DAYS AFTER HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS, HE ROSE FROM THE DEAD. HUNDREDS OF EYEWITNESSES SAW HIM, SPOKE WITH HIM, AND TOUCHED HIM.

The Risen Jesus is now what humanity was always meant to be: God's ruler of the world. Having conquered death, he proved that he was the promised One. He proved

he can make good on his promise to give life to all who trust him for it. The resurrection shows us that Jesus is alive and that our hope for a better future, a better world is not in vain.

Kingdom

The final chapter in God's story is yet to come. The Bible promises Jesus will come again to make all things right. At that time he will judge with perfect fairness—not merely pronouncing what's good and what's bad, but actually correcting the bad and confirming the good.¹⁰

At this final judgment, the consequence of our choice to accept or reject Jesus will stand for all eternity.

Those who have taken Jesus up on his promise of life—those who have trusted him as their only hope to enter back into that love relationship with God—will forever enjoy him and the life he had always wanted us to have. In Jesus' future kingdom, they will experience life without death, disease, sorrow, pain, evil, greed, deception, hatred, prejudices, or abuse.

However, those who have refused him in this life will not enter the life to come. They will experience endless anguish, separated from God.

In the Kingdom, creation will finally be all that God originally intended. The world will know the loving care of God's Kingship and God will be freely loved by those whom he created.

All will be good and right once more—forever.





The Big Picture

This is the story line of the Bible—the big picture. It is the story of a God who loves us, but will not force his love upon us. It is the story of a humanity who defiantly seeks its own way and consistently blames God for the mess. But it's also a story telling us that, despite our betrayal and arrogance, God comes in the person of Jesus and personally suffers the violence of the mess we have made, in order to make for us a way back home.

IN A VERY REAL SENSE, THE WORLD, AS WE KNOW IT TODAY,
IS A RUNAWAY BRIDE.

Only, we didn't just leave God at the altar. No, it was much worse than that. On the honeymoon night we went out and slept with the enemy.¹¹ But God loves us so much that he has never given up his relentless pursuit to win us back.

Now, I admit, this does sound a little like a fairy story for kids rather than a serious explanation of God and good and evil in the world. But doesn't this story strangely resonate with your deepest longing for things to be as they should be? Doesn't it connect with your deepest sense that things are not right? Doesn't it seem to confirm the conviction that we are made for something more¹² and that there is something we are missing?

The world is not the way it's supposed to be. You and I are not the way we were supposed to be—and we know it. Because you see, the problem with the world is *in* me and *in* you. The problem is not just “out there”—it's in here. We think the problem is “them,” not us. We won't admit the problem is in us too. *But it is...*

No one starts with a clean slate. We all grow up in families that shape us, and some of that shaping feeds our inherited selfishness. We all live within social structures that encourage certain attitudes and behaviors, and many of them are self-serving. And we all, each of us, without exception, don't even live up to our own moral standards, let alone those of a perfect Deity.

Since the very first betrayal, human beings have an intrinsic flaw that disposes us toward sin and the consequence of death—look around: *one out of every one people die.*

I know. I hear you, “Oh come on... we're not all that bad.” Yeah, most of us are good enough to do something virtuous, something unselfish, from time to time. You're right, we're not as bad as we could be if we really went wild. But our customary excuses, “I'm not as bad as he is,” or “Hey, I haven't killed anybody!” or “Nobody's perfect,” or “Everybody does it,” sound woefully inadequate when we look at how Jesus lived his life.



WE LIVE AFTER HISTORY'S MOST VIOLENT CENTURY, AND WE FLATTER OURSELVES THAT WE ARE BASICALLY GOOD PEOPLE WHO OCCASIONALLY DO BAD THINGS.

God cannot help us if we insist that we can help ourselves. God cannot forgive us unless we admit we need forgiveness. God cannot give us life if we insist on finding it on our own.

The first step is to honestly admit we have run the business into the ground. We need to admit we are the reason the world is the way it is. We are broken, beyond our ability to fix ourselves. We are weak, mean, unstable, and in constant conflict with each other. We are sinners, and we can't just reach in and straighten our twisted nature. We have no hope of ever finding a solution if we will not admit we have a problem.

And you see, the basic problem of sin is that it is an offense against God—not simply against the law of God, but against the love of God and his desire to enjoy a loving relationship with us. Sin disregards that desire and rejects that relationship. To put it plainly, sin dumps God on the honeymoon and sleeps with the enemy.¹³

Sin is not simply breaking God's law, it's breaking God's heart. If we are to be restored to what we were intended to be, it will have to be done *for* us. Our only hope for true healing and lasting change is in trusting Jesus to do

for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Only he can remove the guilt we carry from our constant running away from God. Only he can restore the relationship with God that we have been running away from throughout history.

God offers forgiveness as a free gift. You don't have to work for it; you don't have to earn it. Forgiveness is received through genuine faith in Jesus.

HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS: EVERYONE WHO TURNS TO GOD, TRUSTING JESUS TO FORGIVE SIN AND GIVE NEW LIFE, RECEIVES EXACTLY WHAT GOD PROMISES—RESTORED INTIMACY WITH GOD AND A WELCOME BACK INTO HIS FAMILY FOREVER.

Sadly, not everyone is willing to come home. Most of this world's population continues to insist on living on their own, trying to find their own solutions. Some live in indifference, others in outright defiance. But God will not force you to love him. The decision we make to live with or without God in this life will stand in the life to come.

Now, that explains the mysterious idea of hell. Comic strips picture hell as a place where demons run wild, torturing human souls. The Bible uses a variety of images and warnings to help us see that hell is eternal separation from God—good and evil, light and darkness, pleasure rather than pain, joy rather than anguish. Hell is the end result of



moral evil. Hell is the final destination of people who have repeatedly rejected God's relentless offer to come home and receive forgiveness and life.

God has given us free will and he has promised to not violate that will by honoring our decisions. No one goes to hell who has not freely chosen—over a lifetime of deliberate choices—to go there.¹⁴

C.S. Lewis confronted questions about hell like this: “In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ Wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But he has done so, on [the cross]? To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone. Alas, I am afraid that is what he does.”¹⁵

Hell is where God lets us have our way, to be left alone, forever. But, of course, he has a much better plan for you.



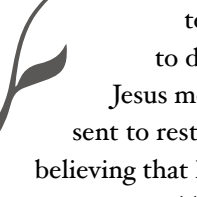
The Bottom Line

You see, God has come in person, as Jesus Christ, and for a second time, he offers us life—Eternal Life. The question everyone must answer is this: What are you going to do with God's second offer of eternal life? What will you do with Jesus? As the Bible presents him, he is the bridegroom and you have been the runaway bride. He has shown you how much he loves you in that while we were sinners, he died for us. He has shown you how far he is willing to go to save you, and he is the way back into the sacred romance with God.

**WILL YOU FINALLY QUIT RUNNING AND SAY,
"I DO. I DO TAKE YOU, JESUS, TO BE MY SAVIOR.
I WANT TO LIVE WITH YOU NOW AND FOREVER"?**

If so, tell God that you now understand how much he loves you and how much he has always loved you. Tell him you know you have been running away from him, that you know you are flawed, and that you know you need his forgiveness in order to really live. Tell him you are trusting Jesus—his death and resurrection—to forgive your sin and to give you new life.

You know what it means to trust in a person. You know what it means to trust in a promise. We trust people



to be who they say they are, we trust them
to do what they say they will do. Trusting
Jesus means to believe he is the One that God has
sent to restore the broken relationship, and it means
believing that he can and will forgive you of your sins and
give you eternal life. It means discovering God's purpose
for your life.

If you're ready to stop running away, tell him now,
through prayer: *Father God, I now understand how much you
love me and how much you have always loved me. I know I have
been running from you. I admit that, just like everyone else in this
world, I am a sinner. I know I need your forgiveness in order to
receive the new life you promise and be who you created me to be.*

*God, thank you for coming in person and dying for me.
Thank you, Jesus, for dying on the cross in my place. Thank you for
promising to give me eternal life. Right now, I want you to know,
I am trusting you to keep your promise to me. I am trusting you to
forgive my sin and give me life. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.*

What's next?

A life spent following Jesus is the best way to live! When we switch our focus from the earthly (and temporal) to the eternal, *everything changes*.

With any new relationship, we need to get to know as much as possible about one another. The best way to get to know Jesus is to spend time with him. Set aside a few minutes each day to read some of his words (or words about him) and talk to him just like you would to a friend. Thank him and praise him. Cry out to him with your fears, and trust him with your dreams.

SPEND THE NEXT 31 DAYS GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CREATOR AND SAVIOR, USING THE SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER REFERENCES ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES.

And before you put this booklet down, remember that we're not meant to go this road alone. Get plugged into a community of believers, to be encouraged and supported. We'd love to connect with you as you begin your journey, and walk with you along the way. We're so excited to talk with you about what God is doing in your life!

Visit fellowshipgreenville.org/newlife and complete the form at the bottom of the page to get in touch with one of our pastors.

31 DAYS WITH JESUS

If you don't have a preferred translation, we recommend esvbible.org. All of the prayers can be found at aprayercollective.com.

- ❑ DAY 1—Jesus Foretold: [Isaiah 53](#)
[Prayer: God of Our Fathers](#)
- ❑ DAY 2—Jesus' Birth: [Matthew 1:18-25](#)
[Prayer: The Spirit's Work](#)
- ❑ DAY 3—Jesus' Baptism: [Matthew 3:1-4:11](#)
[Prayer: Great Are You, O Lord](#)
- ❑ DAY 4—Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: [John 4:1-26](#)
[Prayer: How Long, O Lord?](#)
- ❑ DAY 5—Jesus Rejected in His Hometown: [Luke 4:14-30](#)
[Prayer: The Lord Is My Shepherd](#)
- ❑ DAY 6—Jesus Calls His Disciples: [Luke 5:1-11](#); [Matthew 9:9-13](#)
[Prayer: You Are More](#)
- ❑ DAY 7—Sermon on the Mount: [Luke 6:17-46](#)
[Prayer: The Lord's Prayer](#)
- ❑ DAY 8—Healing, Forgiveness: [Matthew 8:1-17](#)
[Prayer: Joy Comes in the Morning](#)
- ❑ DAY 9—Encounters with the Pharisees: [Matthew 12:22-45](#)
[Prayer: A Prayer of Confession](#)

- ❑ DAY 10–Parable of the Sower, Weeds, and Seeds: [Matthew 13:1-43](#)
[Prayer: God Our Fortress](#)
- ❑ DAY 11–Jesus Walks on Water: [Mark 6:45-56](#)
[Prayer: God's Riches in Christ](#)
- ❑ DAY 12–Jesus Heals a Man, Woman, and Girl: [Mark 5:1-13](#)
[Prayer: A Prayer for Leaders](#)
- ❑ DAY 13–Feeding the 5000: [John 6:1-14](#)
[Prayer: Have Mercy on Me](#)
- ❑ DAY 14–Peter Identifies Christ: [Luke 9:18-27](#)
[Prayer: Your Dwelling Place](#)
- ❑ DAY 15–Jesus Heals a Boy: [Mark 9:14-32](#)
[Prayer: An Instrument of Your Peace](#)
- ❑ DAY 16–Teachings and Parables: [Matthew 17:24-18:20](#)
[Prayer: You Are My God](#)
- ❑ DAY 17–More Teachings and Parables: [Matthew 18:21-19:15](#)
[Prayer: Hope in the Lord](#)
- ❑ DAY 18–Rich Young Ruler: [Mark 10:17-31](#)
[Prayer: A Prayer for Others](#)
- ❑ DAY 19–Disciples Sent Out: [Luke 10:1-24](#)
[Prayer: I Am Yours](#)
- ❑ DAY 20–The Good Samaritan: [Luke 10:25-37](#)
[Prayer: Search Me, O God](#)

- ❑ DAY 21–Jesus Teaches How to Pray: [Luke 11:1-13](#)
[Prayer: Faithful is the Lord](#)
- ❑ DAY 22–Jesus Revives Lazarus: [John 11:1-44](#)
[Prayer: Spiritus Sanctus](#)
- ❑ DAY 23–Jesus Comes to Jerusalem: [Matthew 21:1-27](#)
[Prayer: Hallelujah: O My Soul](#)
- ❑ DAY 24–Last Supper: [John 13:1-17](#)
[Prayer: Our Covenant God](#)
- ❑ DAY 25–Comfort for the Disciples: [John 14-15](#)
[Prayer: To the Ends of the Earth](#)
- ❑ DAY 26–Jesus Arrested and Disowned: [Matthew 26:36-75](#)
[Prayer: Our Maker and Healer](#)
- ❑ DAY 27–Jesus’ Trial: [John 18:19-19:16](#)
[Prayer: My Heavenly Protector](#)
- ❑ DAY 28–Jesus’ Crucifixion and Death: [John 19:17-42](#)
[Prayer: For Joy](#)
- ❑ DAY 29–Jesus’ Resurrection, Appearances: [John 20-21](#)
[Prayer: The Fruit of the Spirit](#)
- ❑ DAY 30–Great Commission: [Matthew 28:16-20](#)
[Prayer: Praise Him, All Creation](#)
- ❑ DAY 31–Jesus’ Kingdom Come: [Revelation 4-5, 22:12-21](#)
[Prayer: Disturb Us, Lord](#)

NOTES

1. Adapted from Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 11-12.
2. John Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted?*, 71. This book had a profound impact on how I came to understand the storyline of the Bible, as you see in the endnotes below.
3. Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, 82.
4. Stackhouse, 110-111.
5. Paraphrase of Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 31-43.
6. Stackhouse, 112.
7. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Whimsical Christian*, 12.
8. John Stott, *The Cross*, 159-160.
9. Stackhouse, 117-119.
10. Ibid, 122.
11. John Eldredge, *Sacred Romance*, Act III, 78-79.
12. Stackhouse, 109.
13. Ibid, 117.
14. Ibid, 122-123.
15. C.S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 128.

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info@fellowshipgreenville.org

