

The Wisdom of the Word

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BIBLICAL ANSWERS TO
TEN PRESSING QUESTIONS
ABOUT CATHOLICISM

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AND

MATTHEW LEVERING



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To **Nancy Dauphinais** and **Joy Levering**

“The LORD bless you and keep you;
The LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”
—Numbers 6:24–26

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INTRODUCTION

In this book, we propose that Catholic faith has a strong basis for its claims—and that a central way to discover this is through the Bible, as canonized in the Church, proclaimed in the liturgy, professed in the Creeds, and embodied in the lives of the saints. We invite Catholics who are thinking about leaving the Church, or who are confused about elements of Catholic faith and practice, to pause and give the Bible a chance to illuminate the most challenging questions that the Church faces today.

In addition to the evils of the sexual abuse scandals—which the Church needs to address with deep repentance and spiritual renewal, marked by accountability and attentiveness to the victims¹—we see other signs that the Church is suffering from malaise and confusion. In our experience, at many if not most American parishes, only a minority of Catholics believe that *all* the Church's most solemn teachings about faith and morality are true. It seems reasonable to conclude that the crisis that the Church is experiencing among its members is caused not least by a *loss of faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior* whose words and deeds have been faithfully communicated to us through Sacred Scripture as handed on and interpreted by the Catholic Church.

Once people no longer believe that the Catholic faith communicates the Word of God who has come to save us from sin and death and for everlasting intimacy with God, then Catholicism is no longer of real interest. This is the core of the crisis of faith that we face today. Put simply, such faith becomes salt that has “lost its taste” and “is

1. For an important start, see Robert Barron, *Letter to a Suffering Church: A Bishop Speaks on the Sexual Abuse Crisis* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2019).

no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot” (Matt. 5:13).

Bishop Robert Barron has succinctly named the problem: “Young people are quitting the Church because they don’t believe in the teachings of classical Christianity.”² Barron is especially attentive to the phenomenon of “nones”—people with no religious affiliation. He states that today “fully forty percent of those classed as millennials (born 1981 to 1996) are ‘nones,’ and among Catholics in that age group, fully fifty percent have left the Church. This means that every other Catholic child baptized or confirmed these last thirty years now no longer participates in the life of the Church.”³ This is a heartrending statistic, one that we have personally experienced in our lives.

A young Catholic priest, Fr. Josh Johnson, provides a perspective on the real people behind the numbers: “I remembered my older brothers’ responses to being confirmed: They immediately stopped setting foot in a Catholic Church. For them, confirmation was like ‘graduating’ from the Church.”⁴ But when we listen to the Bible and gather around the Eucharistic table, we share in God’s love story for us. How can this truth be rediscovered?

Pope Francis, in his first encyclical *The Light of Faith*, probes the roots of the loss of belief in divine revelation. He observes that, to many contemporary Catholics, faith appears to be “an illusory light, preventing mankind from boldly setting out in quest of knowledge”

2. Robert Barron, “The USCCB Meeting, Jordan Peterson, and the ‘Nones,’ Catholic World Report, June 18, 2019, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2019/06/18/the-usccb-meeting-jordan-peterson-and-the-nones/>.

3. Robert Barron, “Evangelizing the Nones,” in *Renewing Our Hope: An Essay on the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 22.

4. Fr. Joshua Johnson, *Broken and Blessed: An Invitation to My Generation* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2018), 29. Likewise, the young Catholic theologian Stephen Bullivant, in his recent book *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America Since Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), offers a helpful diagnosis and confirmation of this same trend.

and entrapping the faithful in a pre-modern and pre-scientific superstition.⁵ In his apostolic exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*, he makes these concerns more concrete: “In the case of the popular cultures of Catholic peoples, we can see deficiencies which need to be healed by the Gospel: machismo, alcoholism, domestic violence, low Mass attendance, fatalistic or superstitious notions which lead to sorcery, and the like.”⁶ Many once-Catholic cultures, he says, are today marked by “a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism.”⁷ Divine revelation is neither believed nor lived.

In response to this problem of faith, recent popes consistently urge the whole Church to turn more deeply to Scripture. According to Pope St. John Paul II, the Bible teaches us saving truth by offering “a vision of the human being and the world which has exceptional philosophical density.”⁸ Pope Benedict XVI expresses his own confidence in Scripture: “The Church lives in the certainty that her Lord, who spoke in the past, continues today to communicate his word in her living Tradition and in sacred Scripture.”⁹ He eloquently summarizes the stance of the Church toward the Bible: “I trust the Gospels.”¹⁰

5. Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 2, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 29, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.

6. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 69, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

7. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 64. The pope underlines the role of the Bible in renewing the Church: “It is essential that the revealed word radically enrich our catechesis and all our efforts to pass on the faith” (no. 175).

8. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 80, encyclical letter, Vatican website, September 14, 1998, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html.

9. Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 18, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, September 30, 2010, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xxi.

Pope Francis reminds us to let God speak to us in the Bible: “The prayerful reading of God’s Word, which is ‘sweeter than honey’ (Ps. 119:103) yet a ‘two-edged sword’ (Heb. 4:12), enables us to pause and listen to the voice of the Master. It becomes a lamp for our steps and a light for our path (cf. Ps. 119:105).”¹¹ Under the guidance of the tradition and teaching of the Church, the Bible is a source of truth for our lives. When we listen to the Bible, we hear the voice of Jesus Christ leading us on our life’s journey.

Why so much focus on the Bible? Such a biblically-focused approach to Catholicism may appear questionable to readers who imagine that they already know what the Bible teaches or, alternatively, suppose that the Bible is too confusing and thus only known by experts.¹² Moreover, isn’t Catholicism the religion, not of a book, but of a living person, Jesus Christ?¹³ This is so, but a central way that Jesus invites us to meet him is through the words of Sacred Scripture, which reveal the meaning of our existence. God our Creator loves us and comes to meet us in Jesus Christ, so as to lift us into his everlasting light and life in the Holy Spirit. As Catholic theologian Leonardo

11. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 156, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, March 19, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

12. In the present book, we treat the Bible as an ecclesial, canonical, inspired text that prepares the people of Israel for the coming of Jesus Christ and that proclaims the truth about him and about our life in Christ. With the exception of some footnotes, we do not take up historical-critical questions regarding authorship, ancient genres, or whether a particular story has a historical referent “behind the text” or simply has a typological import in God’s plan for his scriptural word. Taken as a whole, the historical truth of the people of Israel under their kings, priests, and prophets and the historical truth of Jesus Christ’s public ministry, crucifixion, and glorious Resurrection ground our analysis. For further discussion of these issues, see Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation: The Mediation of the Gospel through Church and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). See also Brant Pitre and John Bergsma, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018).

13. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 108: “The Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book.’ Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word’ of God, a word which is ‘not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1997], 31).

DeLorenzo aptly expresses the matter, the Bible draws us out of ourselves and teaches us “how to know Jesus on God’s terms.”¹⁴

It is not for nothing that the Second Vatican Council emphasized that the Church receives the Scriptures, taken together with Sacred Tradition, “as the supreme rule of faith, since, as inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the word of God Himself without change, and make the voice of the Holy Spirit resound in the words of the prophets and Apostles.”¹⁵ Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit speaks authoritatively, offering a faithful witness to help us understand our experience and discover how to embrace Christ’s redemptive love and to live in communion with God. The council insists that “like the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture.”¹⁶

Faced with the challenging questions of our time that cause problems for handing on the faith, the Second Vatican Council’s instruction should inspire us. After all, as we hope to show, when read with a sense for the unity of the Old and New Testaments, Scripture provides answers to questions that frequently lead people to abandon faith. As Bishop Barron says, “God’s definitive revelation through the Bible—the showing forth of his unique manner of being—constitutes . . . a world of meaning, a new way of imagining ourselves, a matrix of thought, action, and value otherwise unavailable to us.”¹⁷

14. Leonard J. DeLorenzo, *What Matters Most: Empowering Young Catholics for Life’s Big Decisions* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2018), 87, 95.

15. *Dei Verbum*, no. 21, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 35. Commenting on *Dei Verbum*, Pope John Paul II distinguishes the full Catholic view of “the unity which the Spirit has created between Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church” from an erroneous “‘biblicism’ which tends to make the reading and exegesis of Sacred Scripture the sole criterion of truth” (*Fides et Ratio*, 55).

16. *Dei Verbum*, no. 21, 35.

17. Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 272. For an exemplar of the mode of reading that we pursue in the present book, see Barron’s “Training in the Divine School: Hebrews 12:5–11,” in *Word on Fire: Proclaiming the Power of Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 2008), 28–34.

The purpose of this book is to invite people to enter into this biblical “world of meaning.”¹⁸

We have identified ten major difficulties that Catholics who are falling away or have fallen away from the Church often have with respect to the Catholic faith:

1. They no longer believe in a Creator God, let alone one who became incarnate in Jesus Christ and rose from the dead.
2. They no longer think of faith as involving authoritative divinely revealed truth, and so “obedience” to the Word of God as mediated by the Church no longer makes sense.
3. It appears to them that the “power” of the Holy Spirit is too weak to transform our hearts. After all, the Church’s leaders and members are so sinful.
4. They take what they have heard about the saving power of the cross and the truth of the Eucharist to be disturbing. Surely, they think, God doesn’t need the bloody sacrifice of his Son, and neither do we need to commune sacramentally in Jesus’ Body and Blood.
5. God’s offer of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ no longer appears necessary to them. Many think that God does not take our deeds, good or bad, very seriously.
6. They no longer find meaning in the Church’s call for believers to be distinct from the world and avoid “worldliness.” The world’s moral standards make sense to them, and they see the Church’s rules as absurd and outdated.
7. They admire the Church’s care for the poor but reject the Church’s other doctrines. On this view, Catholic concern for the under-

18. For an overview of the Bible, see our earlier book *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

privileged merely means the attempt to change unjust economic and political structures.

8. Catholic teachings on sex and marriage appear especially unreasonable, oppressive, and contrary to reality.
9. The infighting and arguments among Catholics seem to invalidate the claims of Christian faith to bring peace and reconciliation.
10. They find the great heroes and saints of the Catholic tradition to be difficult to relate to and irrelevant to modern life.

In response to these ten major difficulties, each of the following chapters selects an emblematic biblical verse and, on this basis, turns to explore the wisdom of the Bible. The biblical answers we provide are not the sort that can be looked up quickly on the internet or summarized in a short message, for we aim to open up the reader's understanding and imagination. We employ a meditative approach of unfolding the biblical narrative and examining key themes, central stories, and pivotal figures. The answers to the above difficulties arise from within this attentive exposition. The answers we offer are meant to be, not the final word, but rather a step on a lifelong journey toward joyfully believing and practicing the Catholic faith. Sometimes the Bible's answers are rather blunt. Inevitably, those who dare to learn from the Bible must be willing to be challenged and stretched.

Who is the audience for this book? Pastors, professors, teachers, parents, seminarians, students, and anyone who wants to know how the Bible helps answer their deepest and most urgent questions. Do you, or someone you know, think that certain elements of the Catholic faith just don't make sense? As part of seeking answers, are you willing to take a deep dive into the Bible, trusting that it may well be a source of wisdom? Are you bold enough to give the wisdom of

sacred Scripture a chance? If so, we have written this book for you. Together, let us ask Jesus to enable us—as after his Resurrection he enabled his Apostles—“to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

Why Believe in God and in Jesus Christ?

*“The Author of life, whom God raised
from the dead” (Acts 3:15)*

Does God exist? It has become almost popular today to answer “No.” Some who claim to be atheists or agnostics may feel that what we know about science leaves no room for religious belief. Even a number of baptized Catholics are unsure whether God exists and whether Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God who rose from the dead. One recent study of this phenomenon quotes a young man who, having left the Church, explains: “I lost my faith studying science at school and beginning to think for myself about the plausibility of the existence of God and the context in which religions were established. I concluded that Christianity . . . was just a cultural creation based on beliefs held by people two thousand years ago, when they didn’t have scientific explanations for seemingly divine occurrences.”¹ And another young man comments, “When I try to justify my belief in a supernatural being or in Christ as a felt presence in my life, I feel silly.”² Bishop Robert Barron has found that many young people, even if raised as Christians, have a “fundamental conviction that religion is finally irrational, a matter of complexes and fantasies.”³ *The cosmos*

1. Stephen Bullivant, Catherine Knowles, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, and Bernadette Durcan, *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 39. Another ex-Catholic young woman remarks: “Now that we have such scientific advances we no longer need a higher being to explain why we came to be on this Earth” (39).

2. Bullivant et al., *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return*, 40.

3. Robert Barron, *Arguing Religion: A Bishop Speaks at Facebook and Google* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2018), 4.

is so vast; the world is so wicked; Jesus lived and died two thousand years ago; modern people have evolved past the need for God. Today, we know better.

In *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*, Sherry Weddell identifies a second obstacle to embracing Catholicism in a life-changing manner. Some Catholics believe in God, but only in a distant God, a sort of cosmic force behind the universe. Weddell writes, “When Pew researchers asked American adults a series of questions about the kind of God they believed in, a startling pattern emerged: *Nearly a third of self-identified Catholics believe in an impersonal God.*”⁴ It’s hard to imagine how someone who believes in such an impersonal God would continue to attend Mass regularly for an extended length of time. There is little meaning or comfort in knowing and loving a God who doesn’t know and love us in return.

Even those who affirm the existence of a personal God slip at times into unhelpful beliefs about God, such as the idea that the God of Christianity will make everything work out in this life. Fr. Josh Johnson tells the story of a Christian woman whose faith began to flag as she suffered tremendous difficulties in her family. She told the priest, “If God cared about me, then I wouldn’t be suffering so much.” Fr. Johnson responded by speaking to the woman about Mary and the Apostles. They were chosen by God, yet they suffered greatly. God accomplished his purposes through their faithfulness in the midst of difficulties. And in their faithfulness, they were imitating Christ, who himself won the victory over the power of sin not by escaping suffering but through his own faithful suffering. This woman would not have called herself an atheist or an agnostic. She went to church and was part of a Christian community. Yet, as Fr. Johnson notes,

4. Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2012), 43.

“the lies she learned and ultimately came to believe about God crippled her from really getting to know him. She never saw God as he has revealed himself in the Scriptures and the Church.”⁵

This chapter explores the biblical teaching about God and Jesus Christ. How can we learn what the Bible has to teach about who God is and what Jesus Christ has done for us? The Bible not only teaches that God exists but also claims that we can come to know his existence when we contemplate the mysteries and order within the universe. The Bible also knows, however, that our human conceptions of God are often confused. We are invited to discover answers to questions that science can’t answer on its own.⁶ Thus, God reveals his true nature to the people of Israel over centuries. The God who created the universe and created us out of his love is the same God who seeks us out in our brokenness and reveals himself and his ways to us out of his mercy. In the New Testament, God reveals himself fully in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and offers us forgiveness of sins, the removal of shame, and eternal life.

Fulton Sheen once said that the religions and philosophies throughout history display the best—and at times the worst—of the human search for God. He observed that what makes Christianity unique can be seen in the mystery of Christmas, when the God of the universe became a small infant in arms of Mary. In this dramatic moment, God reverses the usual order: the Bible does not tell of our search for God; the Bible tells of God’s search for us.⁷ The goal of this chapter is to consider how God’s search for us fulfills and elevates

5. Johnson, *Broken and Blessed*, 56, 58.

6. Pace such books as Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010).

7. See Fulton Sheen, *The True Meaning of Christmas* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955), 7. Sheen makes clear that the theme of God’s search for us likewise characterizes the Old Testament (and Judaism). See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955).

our search for God in ways we could have never imagined. We will come to see why believing that God exists and that his Son, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead is not only central to the Catholic faith, but also in accord with our intelligence and our deepest desires to find meaning in our lives.

Seeking the Face of God

The words of the Psalmist proclaim: “‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me” (Ps. 27:8–9).⁸ Another Psalm likewise expresses this desire to see God, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps. 42:1–2).

To see someone’s face is to see the truth of that person, to know the other person without anything masking or hiding the person’s identity. What does it mean to come to see the true face of God? One thing we can be sure of: on our own, there is nothing we can do to make God’s face visible to us. He is not a statue covered in cloth that we can simply unmask. If we are to see his face, he has to take the initiative to reveal himself to us.

The word for “revelation” in the New Testament is *apo-kalypsis*, which means an “un-veiling.” The word “revelation” is the title of the last book of the Bible, in which the heavenly worship of God is unveiled before our earthly eyes. The entire biblical narrative tells how God enters into our human story over time and slowly leads us out of darkness to come to see his truth, goodness, and beauty.⁹

8. Biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition with occasional modifications, unless otherwise noted.

9. Note that biblical passages can be taken out of canonical context in order to paint a different picture of God, especially by focusing on the portrayal of God in some of the Old Testament’s passages as commanding the Israelites to put to death the entire populace of conquered cities (sadly, a relatively common practice in the ancient Near East). Some authors also highlight anthropomorphic depictions of God, such as passages where God is portrayed

Not everyone can be Enoch, who is described as having “walked with God” all his life (Gen 5:22). Indeed, many people over the millennia have paid little or no attention to the divine, other than perhaps occasionally to consult, as King Saul did, “the mediums and the wizards” in moments of stress (1 Sam. 28:3). Many people today have given up the quest for God. The message of the Bible is that God has not given up the quest for us.

In Israelite history, people found it difficult to worship God as the Creator and Savior—for some of the same cultural reasons that cause people to turn away from God today. In the ancient Near East, there were plenty of other gods to be worshipped, and they sometimes seemed to do better at protecting their people than God did at protecting his people. Israel’s God, moreover, was demanding of upright living. The people were not averse to assimilation to the prevailing ways of the contemporary culture, as when in the second century BC some of the people urged, “Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us” (1 Macc. 1:11). Our generation is not the first to find worshipping the revealed God of Israel off-putting.

as changing his mind or as jealous. See, for example, Dan Barker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (New York: Sterling, 2016). In the present book, we will focus on the main lines of the Bible’s portrait of God, allowing—as Jewish and Christian interpreters have done throughout the centuries—for the troubling passages to be understood in light of the full canonical and ecclesial witness to the truth about God. Readers seeking further insight into these issues should see such studies as Mark Sheridan, OSB, *Language for God in the Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014); Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); R.W.L. Moberly, *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Matthew J. Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013); Mary E. Mills, *Images of God in the Old Testament* (London: Cassell, 1998); Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). See also Steven Lewis, “Dan Barker and the Immoral God of the Bible,” in *Answering the Music Man: Dan Barker’s Arguments against Christianity*, ed. B. Kyle Keltz and Tricia Scribner (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 109–31.

In revealing himself, God therefore had to show both his reality and his love, without compromising the need for people to live in a new way, so as to be able to participate in divine life and love. In ancient Israel, one of the most common forms of idolatry was the worship of Baal, a male god who was thought to have the power to make lands and families fertile. Baal-worship did not require interior conversion or the practice of righteousness; it was simply an attempt to gain earthly abundance and control by appeasing an imagined god. Those who practiced such idolatrous worship at times engaged in sexual intercourse with cult-prostitutes, and some even practiced child sacrifice, killing infants for the purpose of supposed temporal gain.

For a moment, let us consider Baal-worship not as sinful disobedience, but rather as the enshrinement of a false image of God, false images still around today and indeed worthy of rejection. The people manufactured a god in their own image, as a representation of their own lust, greed, violence, and thirst for power. They failed to see the authentic face of God. The story of the Bible is the story of God correcting false human images of himself and progressively unveiling his true image by means of a dialogue with his people who come to know and express his name and his ways more and more over time.

The Prophet Hosea powerfully depicts God's efforts to correct our distorted understanding of his true nature as our merciful Creator and Redeemer. In a prophetic sign, God commands Hosea to marry a prostitute who will be unfaithful to the prophet. By directing Hosea to carry out this difficult and painful command, God offers a concrete image and unmistakable sign of his own love for Israel, since God is constantly faithful to an unfaithful and adulterous people.

God promises Hosea that idolatrous Israel, which God has espoused to himself, will one day be restored in fidelity: “On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’” (Hosea 2:16).¹⁰ In Hebrew, the word *baal* indicated a dominating master-slave relationship.¹¹ The biblical view of marriage, in contrast, is one in which the woman is an equal partner with her husband, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Isaiah likewise unveils God’s relation to Israel not as a domineering master, but as a beloved husband: “Your Maker is your husband. . . . For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit” (Isa. 54:5–6).

How hard it can be for us to imagine God as a merciful and loving husband who knows the truth about our infidelity and yet desires to call us apart and “speak tenderly” to us (Hosea 2:14)! Our images of God tend to reduce this tension in one of several false directions: either we imagine a perfect and distant god who despises and rejects our imperfections, a god who leaves us alone to suffer in this world; or we imagine a nice god who simply ignores and overlooks our sins and failings. If we are truthful with ourselves, we often do not even have a consistent false view of God. Instead, we have a confusion of false images about him from which we select, depending on our given moods from one day to the next.

The Bible reveals two great desires that are otherwise often hidden from our experience. First is God’s desire for us. Rather than an indifferent or hostile God, the biblical God loves his creatures, desiring to see us and be seen by us. He chooses us not because of our good qualities or because he has any need for us but only out of his love for us (Deut. 7:7; cf. Eph. 1:4). Second is our desire for God. The

10. See Brant Pitre, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Doubleday, 2014).

11. See Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, 911.

Bible reveals that our deepest desires for life, security, and happiness are realized not through our obsessions with merely earthly security and pleasures, but rather in our coming to love and to see God as he is, in his awe-inspiring holiness and majestic humility.

The Old Testament figures of Moses and Elijah are united by their common desire to see God and by God's showing himself to them, if only imperfectly. Moses on Mount Horeb asks God, "Show me your glory." The Lord answers, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD.' . . . 'But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live'" (Exod. 33:18–20). The language of God's "passing before" Moses is used in the Bible to indicate a theophany, a unique experience and manifestation of God's tremendous presence.

God shows himself to Moses and Elijah so they might come to know more clearly who he is. The Lord says to Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (Exod. 33:19). In choosing the people of Israel, God reveals his true character as the God of mercy, although the full truth about the extent of God's mercy awaits the coming of Jesus Christ. When the prophet Elijah is on the same Mount Horeb (also known as Mount Sinai), the Lord instructed Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD." The Lord then "passed by" Elijah, and he heard the Lord in "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11–13, RSV-CE).¹² Through this episode, we see that the power of God in working salvation is not only seen in great deeds visible to all. God also comes among us in humility because only thus can the humble God of love be rightly known.

Moses leads Israel away from the worship of the false image of God in the golden calf (Exod. 32). It is through him that the Lord

12. For a sharp critique of Elijah (which seems a stretch to us) while recognizing the parallel to Moses, see Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 288–89.

gives Israel its great prayer, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4). Elijah likewise promotes the worship of the one true God. He confronts the king and his people about the false prophets of Baal who had entered the northern kingdom of Israel: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

The question Elijah poses is intended for us as well. Who is God? What images and ideas come to our minds when we speak of God? Because we live within a fallen history, we must reject false images of God in order to see the one God in a faithful manner. God’s revelation tells us the truth that there is one true Creator God who knows us, who loves us, and who offers us mercy. In revealing himself, God prepares his people not only to believe that God exists but to trust the God who has reached out to us.

The Old Testament, therefore, does more than present a vision of God as the Creator of the universe. God reveals himself as a Father of Israel, a loving husband, a Savior and Redeemer, one who never gives up on his beloved people. Furthermore, the Old Testament, in its gradual and partial revelation of God, consistently bears within itself a promise of a greater revelation to come. Deuteronomy speaks of a prophet like Moses who will come (Deut. 18:15–22). Toward the end of the Old Testament, Malachi promises that God will send Elijah to his people (Mal. 4:5). The desire of Moses and Elijah to see the face of God will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ in an even-greater mode of infinite love, mercy, and humility toward sinners.

Knowing God as Creator

To think correctly of God is to distinguish God from all of the things of creation. But more than that, to think correctly of God as *one* is to recognize God as the continual source of the whole of creation, the

superabundant fount of all finite being, whose contingent existence is entirely his gift. The Creator is distinct from the creation in such a way that the creation depends upon the Creator, whereas the Creator does not depend upon the creation.¹³ Let us consider these truths as they are presented in certain paradigmatic biblical instances.

We have seen that Moses is the great teacher of the oneness of God. Moses received his call to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt when he was shepherding a flock near the foot of Mount Horeb. It is here that he encounters the Lord in a burning bush. This bush, burning without being consumed, forms an earthly image of the perpetual actuality of God, whose fiery existence and love never burn out.

Moses hears the words, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6). He hides his face in awe and reverence and receives the promise that the Lord will use him as an instrument to rescue the Lord’s people Israel from their slavery in Egypt. But Moses wants more: he asks the Lord for his name.

So God speaks to Moses and reveals his name, “I AM WHO I AM.” Moses is to speak to the people of Israel and say “I AM has sent me to you” (Exod. 3:14).¹⁴ What could it mean to say “I AM” or “I AM WHO I AM”? Earlier God had revealed himself, saying, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6). In that way, God was describing his relation to the people of Israel. Now he simply stops after saying “I AM.”

To grasp the significance of the Lord’s words, we might compare them to the ways in which we are used to conversing. When we meet another person, we often introduce ourselves by describing specific

13. For discussion, see Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 251–70.

14. For further discussion of “I AM WHO I AM,” see Thomas Joseph White, OP, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 39–44, 292–304.

relationships or work. I might say, “I am his father,” “I am her husband,” or “I am a university professor.” If I were speaking more generally, I might begin by saying, “I am a citizen of the United States.” If I wanted to speak as generally as possible—perhaps addressing someone from Mars who has never met an earthling before—I could begin by saying, “I am a *homo sapiens*, a rational animal.” In that way, I would reveal something fundamental not only about who I am or what I am, but also in what *way* I am; I exist in the mode or form of human-ness.

By the same token, when the Lord reveals his name as “I AM WHO I AM,” he is making a statement about his very mode of being. He is saying that his existence is so perfect that it makes sense to say God is *is-ness*. God is existence itself, the perfect, unfathomably superabundant fullness of actuality or existence, both causing and transcending all finite beings, even the being of the entire universe.

Names given within creation distinguish creatures from one another. God does not exist as merely the greatest creature alongside the rest of creation. Thus, he cannot have a name in the same way as do created realities. His name is unlike other names: he is “I AM.” To speak of God in this manner unveils profound truths. God is unlike all creatures since all creatures have a finite existence. They exist as particular kinds of things, as only parts of the larger whole. God, however, does not exist as a particular kind of thing or as part of the larger whole. God does not fall in a category of “divine beings” or even as the highest being within the universe. Thus, in revealing his name as “I AM,” God reveals himself to exist not as one created thing alongside other created things, nor even as the highest created thing among all created things (see Isa. 45). His infinite existence—the source of all finite existence, but radically unlike any limited, contingent mode of existence—contains within itself all the perfec-

tions that we might imagine: infinite and indescribable goodness, love, wisdom, and beauty. Again, when God says “I AM,” he is saying that there is no act of finite “*am-ness*” within the created world that does not depend upon his infinite “*am-ness*.” To call God “He who *is*” is to say that there is no “*is*” within the created world that does not depend contingently for its being upon his perfect “*is*.”

In a real sense, then, God claims the entire verb “to be” for himself! All created existence comes from—or shares or participates in—God’s transcendent infinite existence.¹⁵ Were God separated from creation, as in deism, then God would be separated from us, and we from him. Were God identified with creation, as in pantheism or contemporary forms of seeing the universe as divine, then he would be trapped within the universe. What the Bible reveals is neither a separation of God from the world nor an identification between God and the world. Instead, it reveals a powerful *distinction* in which God, in his infinite plenitude, lovingly, freely, and continually causes all creaturely existence as the Creator.

Knowing God as Creator and Redeemer

Because God is the Creator, he can also be the Redeemer, supremely loving and caring, able to unite his creatures to his own infinite blessedness. Let us consider several instances in which Scripture attests to the interplay of God’s revelation of himself as the Creator and the Redeemer. We can first see it in the revelation to Moses just discussed. When God reveals his name as “I AM”—namely, the Creator or source of all being—he also reveals his plan to redeem and rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt. Similarly, in 2 Maccabees, a mother tells her son: “I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and

15. For further discussion of what we mean here, see Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher [the tyrannical king], but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers" (2 Macc. 7:28–29). God acts as the Redeemer because he is first the Creator.

Yet, how do we come to the knowledge of God as the Creator? The Psalmist affirms, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1). For the Psalmist, to fail to recognize God indicates a lack of wisdom. Wisdom refers to a judgment about the whole of reality. Proverbs teaches that "the fear of [or respect for] the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). Our decision whether or not to affirm God as the Creator is a judgment that commits our entire self, both head and heart. Whatever we decide on that question comes down to either a true or a false judgment about the whole of reality.

Humans have the ability to reach the very foundations of reality through the power of reason that differentiates us from other earthly creatures. In fact, the Bible teaches that humans have the ability to come to know God as Creator by reflecting on creation. Specifically, the order, goodness, and existence of created things manifest the intelligence and goodness of a Creator (Rom. 1:20).¹⁶ Human reason's abilities receive tribute from the author of the book of Wisdom, who writes, "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Wis. 13:5).

Why then does the existence of God seem doubtful to people? For one reason, people see the evil and suffering in the world and in their own lives and draw the wrong conclusions. As the Wisdom

16. See N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume X*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 393–770, at 432; also N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Book II, Parts III and IV* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 766–67. For the contrary position, see Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

of Solomon's author also notes, our reason does not always take us where it should. The Wisdom of Solomon explains that this error is not God's fault but ours. "For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works" (Wis. 13:1). Our folly consists in impatience: we often end our search for goodness once we have found creatures—or creature comforts—that enrapture us. Wisdom 13 makes this point explicitly: "If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them" (Wis. 13:3). The Wisdom of Solomon sadly observes about people who are extraordinarily learned but who remain unseeing when it comes to God, "If they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?" (Wis. 13:9).

There are consequences to failing to pursue the quest to know God. After all, only the true God may be worshiped above all created things for only the true God ultimately satisfies the full drama of human longing. We cannot be happy without God. When human beings center their lives around created goods, there inevitably follows competition and strife over these necessarily limited goods. In a verse that might sound overly simplistic at first, the book of Wisdom states, "The worship of idols . . . is the beginning and cause and end of every evil" (Wis. 14:27). Recall that idols refer to created things that become the highest goals or values in our lives. Paul echoes this teaching against idolatry when he writes that "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Without God, our hearts pursue the wrong goods in the wrong ways, seeking happiness where it cannot be found.

Drawing upon the teaching of Wisdom 13, Paul writes in Romans 1:20, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things that he has made.” The order and organization of visible creation manifest the ordering and organizing power of the Creator. Unlike nonrational creatures, humans may discern the order and physical laws of the universe and so discover the Creator’s power and wisdom. Moreover, the very being of the universe, finite as it is, requires a Maker.¹⁷

Paul has more to say than merely to praise the ability of human reason to know God’s eternal power and deity. In a similar manner to the book of Wisdom’s author, he argues sadly that those who do not recognize God are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:20). Once the highest good of the Creator is ignored, then created goods are necessarily loved in a disordered way, since only God is worthy of being loved with all of our heart, soul, and strength. The pull of this disordered love darkens our mind, and our desires become confused. Paul thus observes that those who knew God but did not honor him “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25; cf. Rom. 1:21, Matt. 6:24; Eph. 4:17–19). Paul states that all people have sinned, all have fallen short.

All of us are without excuse, but we are not without a future. The light of reason is good, but it is not enough. God has given the world the light of Christ.

Knowing the One God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Knowing the truth about the Creator’s existence and goodness is wonderful and meaningful, but it is not enough to heal our wounds

17. For further discussion, see Matthew Levering, *Proofs of God: Classical Arguments from Tertullian to Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

and disorders, to remove our sins and injustices. More is necessary. At the heart of the New Testament revelation is the startling claim that Jesus Christ shares in the oneness of God.¹⁸ God has “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16) to bear our sins and to reveal his infinite divine love for us. The Gospels present the Son’s intimate relationship to the Father as the foundation of Jesus’ identity and mission. Let’s unfold this relationship by examining some pivotal moments in the life of Jesus.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each depict Jesus’ baptism as the starting point of his public ministry. In terse and powerful language, Matthew writes, “When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matt. 3:16–17; cf. Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1). Right at the start of his earthly ministry, Jesus is revealed as the one on whom the Spirit dwells and the beloved Son of God.

It was not unheard of in ancient Israel for a human being to receive the Spirit of God or even to be called a son of God. Israel’s prophets were often filled with the Spirit, and Israel’s kings would be called sons of God at their coronations; these experiences are always presented as new states that come upon the recipients (1 Sam. 16:13; Ps. 2:7). At Jesus’ baptism, however, he does not enter into a new state of being adopted by the Father. Rather, he manifests his identity as the Spirit-filled Son of the Father.

Jesus’ own prayers to the Father show forth the power and intimacy of the Father-Son relationship. Just before Jesus enters into his

18. For further discussion, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

suffering and death, John 17 transmits an intimate prayer of Jesus to the Father. Jesus expresses in words his unique relationship to the Father: “Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. . . . Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:5, 11).

When Jesus speaks of being one with the Father, this unity is more than a unity of a creature in love with the Creator. Jesus shares in the Creator’s own glory; as the divine Son or Word, he is with the Father from all eternity (John 1:1–2). What is more, it is the Father’s will that the unity and glory of the Father and the Son become, through the Son’s mediation, the source of the disciples’ own unity and glory (see also Matt. 11:25–27).

Luke presents another prayer of Jesus to the Father. This prayer has a richly Trinitarian dimension, depicting the actions of the Holy Spirit, the Son, and the Father as distinct yet unified. Jesus rejoices in the Holy Spirit as he reveals to his disciples the uniqueness of his relationship with the Father: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. . . . No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:21–22). As we saw in John 17, the mission of the Son is to reveal the Father to others. Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus will say that the Father will give the Holy Spirit to anyone who asks (Luke 11:13). The Spirit is thus to be given to us, and the Son is to reveal the Father to us. We are called to enter the intimate communion of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

This truth explains an otherwise puzzling aspect of Jesus’ words from Luke cited above: if the Father is the Lord of heaven and earth, and if human beings may know God as Creator by reflecting on

creation, why then does Jesus say that no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him? To know God as the Creator is a fulfillment of the intellectual and loving capacities of the human creature. Nonetheless, to know God properly as Father signifies a higher perfection.

To know God as Father means that, in some way, we share in his nature as his adopted sons and daughters in the Son. The depths of this teaching are made further apparent when we recall Peter's response when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Messiah [Christ], the Son of the living God," to which Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16:15–17). The Father, not human reason or "flesh and blood," revealed to Peter the uniqueness of Jesus' divine Sonship. In Christ, we are caught up into the wondrous eternal communion of Father and Son in the Spirit.

If Jesus is truly the Son of the living God, then he shares God's nature not merely as a creature but as a divine Son. Most importantly for us, Jesus's unique Sonship becomes the pattern for our adoptive sonship. The same Peter who confesses Jesus as "the Son of the living God" teaches that all Christians are "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).¹⁹ To be a participant of the divine nature is to share intimately in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as adopted children, beloved and cared for eternally.²⁰

In this way, God reveals himself to be both one and three not only in himself but also for us. God the Father reveals his love for us

19. For helpful discussions of the complicated question of Petrine authorship—given that the letter could faithfully reflect Peter's testimony without having been actually written by Peter—see Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 131–47; and Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude*, 127–29.

20. See Daniel A. Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 139–42.

in sending his Son and his Spirit; Jesus reveals himself as the Son of God so that others may become sons and daughters of God; and the Holy Spirit's presence in Jesus is ordered to the Holy Spirit's presence in us as sons and daughters of God.

Let us look to Paul's summary of this teaching in Galatians: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4:4–6). Note the language of *sending*: "God *sent* his Son" and "God has *sent* the Spirit of his Son." These two sendings, or (in theological terms) missions, anchor the whole of our reality, allowing us to enter into a new relationship with God. Because of them, not only may we come to know and love him as our Creator, but we also may cry out to him, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). God sent his Son and sent his Holy Spirit so that we might become sons and daughters, sharing in the Son's own intimate relationship with the Father and using the very language to address God that Jesus used when he prayed: "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36).

But if the revelation of God as both one and three is central to the Christian faith, why is the doctrine of the Trinity not more explicitly stated in the New Testament? In response, we must bear in mind that the New Testament was written as part of the apostolic proclamation of the Good News that God had established a New Covenant by the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, the Bible does not explicitly ask or answer all theological questions. The Bible does not stand alone; rather, it always lives within the ongoing Spirit-filled community of the Church. With that said, it can be shown that the inner logic of the New Testament is fundamentally Trinitarian.

John presents the Trinitarian mystery in Jesus' discourse during the Last Supper. Jesus tells his disciples that, when he goes away, the Father and he will send the Holy Spirit to dwell with them. And he repeats that same point at least three different times during the discourse: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive" (John 14:16–17); "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (John 15:26); and, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). In this way, Jesus amplifies his teaching that the Father and the Son are one, and that this oneness of the Father and the Son is also shared by the promised Spirit of truth.

Paul displays a similar Trinitarian logic in his Letter to Titus through his Trinitarian use of the title of the Savior.²¹ After Paul introduces himself as a "servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ," he speaks of the command he has received from "God *our Savior*" (Titus 1:1, 3; emphasis added). To confess God as the Savior is language that has been hammered out in the Old Testament. When the Lord delivers Israel out of Egypt, Moses and the people exclaim, "The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become *my salvation*" (Exod. 15:2; emphasis added). The prophet Isaiah rejected the claims of idols and proclaimed that God alone is the Savior, "I am the LORD your *God*, the Holy One of Israel, *your Savior*" (Isa. 43:3; emphasis added). Immediately after calling God the Savior, Paul writes, "Grace and peace from God the Father and *Christ Jesus our Savior*" (Titus 1:4; emphasis added). Jesus shares in God the Father's identity as Savior.

21. For authorship questions regarding Titus (often considered to have not been written by Paul) in favor of Pauline authorship, see George T. Montague, SM, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 16–21.

Paul further shows that the Holy Spirit likewise shares in the divine work of salvation. In Titus 3, as he reiterates that both God and Jesus Christ are our Savior, he also identifies the Holy Spirit as the one by whom our salvation is accomplished: “When the goodness and loving kindness of *God our Savior* appeared, *he saved us*, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and *renewal by the Holy Spirit*. This Spirit he poured out upon us richly through *Jesus Christ our Savior*” (Titus 3:4–6; emphasis added). Who then is our Savior? God the Father *is* our Savior, who acts *through* Jesus Christ, and *in* the Holy Spirit. All three share the one divine identity while maintaining their distinctiveness. They carry out the divine, saving action in an ordered relationship—from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

Paul likewise appeals to the unified but distinct relations of the Spirit, the Son, and the Father when he calls the faithful to live in peace and unity.²² In Ephesians 4, he writes, “There is one body and *one Spirit*, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, *one Lord*, one faith, one baptism, *one God and Father* of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4–6; emphasis added). The title “Lord” designates Jesus Christ since Paul also writes in the same letter, “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2), and since Paul interchanges “a prisoner for Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:1) with a “prisoner in the Lord” (Eph. 4:1). This passage speaks of one Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one God and Father. Recall that Paul here is exhorting the church in Ephesus to live in unity. The logic of Paul’s appeal depends upon the prior unity of God to serve as the foundation for the unity of the Church. When Paul speaks of the “one Spirit,” the “one Son,”

22. For further discussion, see Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

and the “one God and Father,” he does not speak of three entities but of one God, a unity now revealed to include the Son and the Spirit.

The announcement of the Trinitarian identity of God is a truth that saves. Paul summarizes this ordered Trinitarian agency earlier when he affirms that “for through [Christ] both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18). To affirm a unity of saving action *through* the Son, *in* the Spirit, *to* the Father is to see that one has been brought from sin and separation from God to forgiveness and intimacy. We now have access to the Father in the Spirit through the Son; the fullness of God’s life has been opened to us and we have been called to enter.

The Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ

At Christmas, the Church’s liturgy offers three different sets of Mass readings, each one assigned to a different time of day when Mass is celebrated. Taken together, these readings include not only the stories from Matthew and Luke concerning Jesus’ birth but also the prologue of John. That is because Christmas is not merely the feast of the Nativity but also the feast of the Incarnation.

What does the Incarnation really mean and what is its importance in the Christian faith? Let us examine some key passages from the beginning of John to answer this question. Echoing Genesis’ “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1), John begins, “*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1; emphasis added).²³ John thus announces a new creation story, the story of our salvation. In telling this story of the new creation, the Evangelist introduces the Word—or *Logos* in Greek—of God. John continues, “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and

23. See the illuminating discussion in Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 291–310, 339–381.

without him not one thing came into being” (1:2–3). The Word is the one through whom all things were made and the one through whom all things will be re-made.

John then presents the Word as the life of the world and the light of the human race. There is a straightforward logic to this role of the Word. In all of our experience and understanding of the world, we see life begotten by living things. So also, the light of reason is begotten by reasoning beings. Thus, if we see living and intelligent beings in the world, then it is reasonable to assume a living and intelligent Creator.

The divine Word in John’s Gospel is identified with life and light: “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). We saw earlier that all created things participate in limited modes in God’s own perfect existence. Through John’s insight, we can now see that human beings also participate, in a unique way, in God’s own intelligence and life. Human reason or “word” (in Greek, both are called *logos*) shares in the divine Word (*Logos*).

In addition to the presence of the Word in all creation and especially in human beings, the Word takes on a previously unheard-of presence by becoming a fellow human being in our history. John summarizes this fundamental reality of the New Creation and the New Covenant: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Word that is the light and life of men now becomes a particular man. The term “flesh” is *sarx* in Greek, which is translated as *caro* in Latin, so the term “in-carn-ation” means becoming enfleshed. Thus to see the man Jesus Christ is to behold the glory of the only Son of God. God, who is transcendent of and present to his creation, can truly become man because God’s infinite “to be” does not compete with or occupy the same ontological level

as a creature. God assumes a human nature to perfect union with himself in the person of the Son.

Sacred Scripture situates the Incarnation within the human person's desire to see God. John writes, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). The only Son, now incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, makes known the eternal Father. Later in John's Gospel, a dramatic dialogue takes place at the Last Supper. The Apostle Philip, echoing the desires of Moses and Elijah, asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus responds, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . . Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me" (John 14:8–11). To see the incarnate Son is to see the Father (cf. 1 John 3:2).

In Jesus Christ, God takes on a human face. As we saw earlier, Paul taught in Romans that the invisible God is knowable, in his eternal power and deity, through the visible things of creation. Through the Incarnation, God is no longer visible simply through the grandeur of his creation; now he is visible as supreme mercy and love in and through the man Jesus Christ. Likewise, in Colossians, Paul describes Christ as "the image [or *icon*] of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). The invisible God is now visible. And Paul does not soften this arresting claim by saying it is metaphorical. Instead, he intensifies the point when he writes a few verses later, "All the fullness of God was pleased to dwell [in Christ]" (Col. 1:19).

But how can all the fullness of God dwell in a human? In the Old Testament, we discover initial ways in which God chose to dwell among his people Israel, especially in the tabernacle and temple. When God comes to dwell in the majestic temple of Solomon, Solomon declares that "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain

you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). It was understood that the Creator of the heavens and the earth dwelt in a mysterious way in the temple in order to enable Israel to worship him properly.

In contrast to the spiritual presence of God in the temple, the Incarnation is a more radical form of indwelling. This indwelling or incarnation means that God becomes substantially present in the world as a human being. No one would have said that God was the temple, but John teaches that the “Word became flesh.” Let us again look at the great expression from John 1:14, which describes the reality of the Incarnation: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Greek word translated here as “lived among us” could also be translated as “tabernacled among us” or even “templed” among us.²⁴

The theme of indwelling in John’s Gospel becomes even clearer when we recall the first tabernacle built by Moses, which was a large, portable, tent-like structure for divine worship. Upon completion, “the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod. 40:35). In the first tabernacle, the cloud, which signifies the presence of the Lord, fills the tabernacle, and then the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle. This same pattern is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In the new tabernacle, the new temple, of God, the Word becomes flesh, and he is filled with the glory of the Lord. Those who see Jesus as the Lord behold his glory, “glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14 RSV-CE).

In addition to the glory of Jesus revealed to those with the eyes of faith, there was also one time before the Resurrection when his glory became visible to earthly eyes. Shortly before Jesus’ final entry

24. See *The Word on Fire Bible*, vol. 1, *The Gospels* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020), 463.

into Jerusalem, Peter, James, and John went up with Jesus on the mountain to pray. As Jesus was praying, “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. . . . Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory” (Luke 9:29, 32).²⁵ The Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) depict Moses and Elijah conversing with the glorified Jesus. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the prophets, all of which point to Jesus Christ (see Luke 24:26–27). But there is more. Earlier we observed how Moses and Elijah encountered God in dramatic and powerful experiences in which God somehow appeared to them. Yet remember that, in their experiences, God’s face was not visible to them. This all changes when Moses and Elijah appear at the Transfiguration. For the first time, they behold the face of God.²⁶

The Gospels continue to disclose Jesus’ divine identity in other episodes. Matthew, Mark, and John all tell the story of Jesus walking on water near the disciples’ boat on the Sea of Galilee. Mark presents an apparently odd detail when he says that Jesus was walking toward them on the sea and that “he intended to pass them by” but that they saw him and became afraid (Mark 6:48). Was Jesus merely playing tricks on his disciples? It is helpful here to recall that the verb “to pass by” is a specific phrase for divine appearance and was used when God appeared to Moses and to Elijah.²⁷ With this in mind, Jesus was not intending to trick his disciples but meant “to pass by” his disciples walking on the water and so reveal his divine glory specifically to them.

25. For historical-critical discussion, see Michael Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke: Volume I (Luke 1—9:50)*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christopher Heilig (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 391–96.

26. See Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York, NY: Image, 2016).

27. See Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

One more way in which Jesus is presented as the incarnate Word is when he takes upon himself the name of God revealed to Moses: “he who is” or “I AM.” In John and in Revelation, the lips of Jesus frequently reverberate with the expression “I am”—*ego eimi* in Greek. In one of his arguments with the Jewish authorities, Jesus makes a striking claim: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:58; emphasis added). The narrative makes it clear that his audience recognized he was intentionally taking up the divine name; the authorities condemned him for blasphemy and “took up stones to throw at him.” Later in John, when Jesus is arrested in the garden, the Jewish soldiers and leaders ask for Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus replies “‘I am’ . . . [and] they drew back and fell to the ground” (John 18:6).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the beginning and the end. The book of Revelation uses this same language not only to speak of Jesus but also to speak of God, “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8). The prophet Isaiah uses these same expressions to identify the God of Israel: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God” (Isaiah 44:6; 45:5). Jesus is associated both with the divine name, “I am,” and with attributes that only belong to God: to be the living one, to be alive forever, to be the first and the last.

The Resurrection of Jesus and Life’s Purpose

The Incarnation culminates in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, by which the whole world is redeemed. God’s Son becomes a man, lives among us, suffers a horrific death, rises to glorified life on earth, manifests himself to his Apostles, and then ascends to reign with the Father. It is a dramatic rescue mission in which God enters

the territory of sin and death in order to free the human race from our tyrannous enslavement to sin and the devil and to restore us to full communion with himself. In a later chapter, we will consider the way in which the death of Jesus reconciles us with God. Here we wish to focus on the Good News that Christ has risen from the dead.²⁸

The preaching of the Apostles focuses on one announcement: Jesus has risen from the dead and forgiveness of sins and eternal life are now possible through him. Paul describes the pivotal role of the Resurrection to the Corinthians: “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve” (1 Cor. 15:3–5). Let us unpack this key testimony to Christ’s death and Resurrection.

Paul uses highly precise and formulaic language in two ways. First, he begins by showing that this is not something that he invented on his own but something that he received and then handed on. The word for “I delivered to you” is *tradere* in Latin, from which we get our word “tradition,” meaning what is handed on from one person and received by another. In this way, Paul provides a witness to one of the foundational elements of the apostolic tradition. The Apostles received and then handed on the Good News of the death and Resurrection of Christ.

Second, Paul repeats the phrase “in accordance with the scriptures” twice within one sentence (1 Cor. 15:3–4). The first usage refers to Christ’s death for our sins; the second refers to Christ’s Resurrection. Christ’s death and Resurrection are God’s startling fulfillment of the covenants and promises of the Old Testament. The language

28. For further discussion, see Matthew Levering, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Historical and Theological Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

of “according to the scriptures” not only is foundational in Paul’s preaching but also is recorded in the Gospels. When the risen Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, he explained to them that it was “necessary that the Messiah [Christ] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26). Then Luke writes, “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27).²⁹ The Apostles consistently preached that Christ’s death and Resurrection were not isolated or accidental events but rather were the primary way in which God brought to fulfillment his promises to Abraham and Israel and through them brought salvation to all the other nations of the world.

At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles, Peter proclaims to the crowd of amazed onlookers that Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified has now been “raised up” and “made both Lord and Messiah [Christ]” (Acts 2:24, 36).³⁰ Later Peter will preach that his listeners had unwittingly “killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15). The early preaching of the Resurrection includes the reality that Jesus had such a unique sharing in the divine power that he could be called “the Author of life.” Only someone who shared in our human nature could suffer death and then rise again; only someone who shared in the divine nature would be able to become the author of new life through his death and Resurrection.

The Resurrection of the Son of God is the Good News. Paul summarizes the Gospel: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord

29. For discussion of the encounter of the two disciples with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, see Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 118–123.

30. For an historical-critical evaluation of the speeches in Acts, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 258–319; see also 862–990 on this particular speech of Peter (Acts 2:14–40).

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). And Peter, when asked how he and John were able to perform miracles, responded by showing how salvation is in the name of Jesus: “Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. . . . There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10, 12). God alone can save—and he has done so through Jesus Christ.

Paul encourages the faithful to think about the meaning of their lives in light of the Resurrection. As a kind of thought experiment, he invites his readers (or rather listeners, since his letters were often read aloud at church gatherings) to ask what would be different if this earthly life were all there is. And he boldly answers, “If for this life only we hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). Likewise, he adds, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (1 Cor. 15:32). In this way, the Apostle challenges a this-worldly view of Christianity that treats the faith as though it were merely a self-help manual promising earthly peace and prosperity. The author of Hebrews summarizes the mindset to be adopted by the faithful: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14). Just as the center of all reality is revealed to be the Trinitarian, Creator God, so our earthly life is shown to be a pilgrimage to God the Father, through the crucified and risen Son, in the Spirit.

The fundamental disposition of the Christian is thus one of hope and trust in God. Hope expresses confidence in attaining the goal of eternal life with God not due to our own efforts but due to his mercy. Paul holds firmly to the hope of the glory to come. He writes, “I con-

sider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). This heavenly glory gives Paul’s life direction and purpose. “But this one thing I do,” he says, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14). All people are likewise called to have the same hope in the glory that is to come.

This hope for glory helps Christians discover the true meaning of their lives. No matter how much we suffer either from our own faults or those of others, Paul invites us to remember we too are called to rise with Christ and to experience the fruits of his Resurrection in our lives today.

Jesus risen—and ascended—gives his followers a new mission and purpose. In the Holy Spirit and through the Son, who now sits at the right hand of the Father, we are called to become united to the Father for eternity. His followers are to proclaim the Trinitarian life they have received so that others may enter that union with God. Jesus gives the Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).

Conclusion

Does God exist? Yes, God is the Creator of the universe. According to Scripture, human reason can know the truth about the existence of God who is the source of all that is good, true, and beautiful in the universe. The capacity of human reason to come to know God, however, also reveals just how much we have failed to know and love him with all of our heart, mind, and strength. Human history should

be a story of men and women returning the love of their Maker. Instead it is the story of our pridefully loving ourselves and the created things of this world more than the Creator and so forming a distorted image of God as either spiteful and unfair or indifferent and untrustworthy.

Thankfully, God did not leave us in our sinful condition with these false conceptions of God and the meaning of our lives. In his revelation to Israel, he already began to show who he truly is and how we truly yearn to know his life-giving love. God reveals to Moses his perfect existence as the “I AM,” the Creator of everything that is. And God likewise shows himself to Moses as the merciful and powerful Redeemer of Israel.

In the Incarnation of the Word and the sending of the Holy Spirit, God revealed that in his one divine nature, supremely humble and merciful, he is Father, Son, and Spirit. Through Christ, this God has acted decisively to allow us to enter a new relationship with him as adopted sons and daughters in the Spirit. This relationship is sealed by the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ.

The apostolic testimony is clear. The Good News is not just that some man has been raised from the dead. Rather the Good News is that the living God, who already began to reveal himself and his goodness by forming his people Israel, has revealed himself in Israel’s Messiah as the one who enters into the very depths of our sorrow and meaninglessness. In Jesus, we have redemption. In Jesus, we see the true face of God. It is he who, having proclaimed his identity and inaugurated his kingdom by calling his disciples and teaching them, reconciles all things on the cross. It is this man who is raised from the dead to glorious life. These are truths worth believing—and worth living—united to “the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15).