

# WHEN GOD AND CULTURE CLASH

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*When God and Culture Clash*

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## INTRODUCTION

The dirt path led through crops, to a clearing, and eventually to a home. Our team of three stopped at a group of low-lying tepee-like structures, some made of sticks, others of grass. They looked unusual, but their purpose remained unclear to me as the structures appeared too small for dwellings.

A few chickens scratched and pecked at the ground, hoping to uncover a juicy snack. Two dogs slumbered peacefully. I sat down, and a duck wiggled into position in front of me. Within minutes twenty or more people of varying ages assembled in a ragged semi-circle, sitting on mats.

Later I learned we sat at the home of a local witch doctor and his family, the tee-pee-like structures relating to his trade. Several people on mats around us were, in fact, clients in his “waiting room.”

Sitting in the circle, I explained twice the story of Jesus, who came to earth as a baby, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again from the dead. Then I asked if anyone wanted

to pray a prayer of faith in him. Several followed my lead in prayer, including the witch doctor, I believe.

More than any other, this experience of sharing the gospel story of Jesus in a small Tanzanian village provided direction for this manuscript. Several thoughts occurred to me.

Assuming these prayers represented genuine prayers of faith, how would these people's new faith affect their understanding of life on Kome Island? Would they continue to sit in the waiting room of a witch doctor, wanting answers to life problems, or would they seek out God's view of the world and his answers for their problems? Would the witch doctor himself change his job or would he hold onto his job and simply stack his new faith on top of his old beliefs?

Every culture creates its own understanding of individual life and a person's place in the world. We call this a worldview. Development of worldviews occurs regularly on Kome Island and everywhere else on the earth. I developed my own worldview growing up in the state of Iowa, in the United States of America.

But what changes about our views when we believe in Jesus? Do we understand the need



to compare what we learn from our culture to what Scripture teaches?

God wants to create something new in all of us when we pray in faith to him. He wants us to leave behind our old man-created ideas and live according to his design of the world. If we pray a prayer of faith but don't evaluate our old beliefs against God's desires, we risk stacking truth on top of falsehood. As a result, our faith becomes confused and weak.

The lessons in this book focus on a biblical worldview and how we can learn to let go of the parts of our own worldviews that don't match God's. When we understand his truth, we see everything differently. We see life as it really is. Join me in looking at a biblical view of the world, and see how we can allow God to transform our lives, from the inside out.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Magic or God?

In the Bible, the book of Acts presents several pictures of how new believers allowed the gospel to change—or not change—their worldview. In several of these stories, magic plays an important part in the pre-faith beliefs of those who accepted the gospel.

Our first example shows up in chapter eight where we meet a magician named Simon. Simon heard the gospel and believed in Christ. But what happened next? Did Simon change his worldview about magic after he became a believer? Did he allow the gospel to change his thinking? Let's study his story.

Beginning in verse 5 we read an evangelist named Philip went to the city of Samaria to teach people about Jesus.

And the crowds were paying attention with one mind to what Philip was saying, because they were hearing and seeing the signs he was doing. For in the case of

many who had unclean spirits, the spirits were crying out with a loud voice and coming out, and many who had been paralyzed and lame people were healed. And there was much joy in that city.

Now a certain man named Simon was formerly practicing magic in the city and amazing the Samaritan people, claiming he was something great. Everyone from small to great was paying attention to him, saying, "This man is called the great power of God!" And they were paying attention to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

And Simon himself also believed, and after being baptized, he was sticking closely to Philip. And because he was observing signs and great powers taking place, he was continually amazed. (Acts 8:5-13)

Simon, the former magician, presented himself to the community as someone great. He amazed people with his powers. When Philip came to speak, Simon listened to his words and believed. However, it seems most of his attention went to the things he saw Philip

*do*. Simon stayed close to Philip because of his amazement at the “signs and great powers” he saw taking place (v. 13).

Often people who do powerful things get our attention. I think of the group gathered at the witch doctor’s home in Tanzania. They gathered there because of the witch doctor’s power and their belief that he could help them. He captured their attention. When our team taught about God’s Son, Jesus, their attention—and even the attention of the witch doctor—turned to God.

Let’s continue with Simon’s story. Simon stayed close to Philip. He watched as two other apostles, Peter and John, came from Jerusalem to pray for the Samaritans and lay hands on new believers. These new believers received the Holy Spirit as a result of the apostles’ prayers (Acts 8:14-17). Simon tried to buy this power he observed.

Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money saying, “Give me also this authority, so that whoever I place my hands on, he might receive the Holy Spirit.”

But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could gain the gift of God through money! You have no part or inheritance in this matter, because your heart is not right before God. Therefore, repent of this evil of yours and plead with the Lord, that perhaps He might forgive you for the intent of your heart, for I see you are full of bitter poison and are in the chains of unrighteousness.”

But Simon, answering, said, “May you yourselves plead for me to the Lord, so that nothing of which you have said may come upon me.” (Acts 8:18-24)

Perhaps Simon previously earned his living through magic. The Bible doesn't tell us if his powers came from learning how to fool people or from demons. We do know people called him “the great power of God!” (Acts 8:10). Now Simon seeks to buy the power he sees in Peter and John. I wonder if he viewed this as a chance to add to his magic tricks.

Let's pay close attention to Peter's response. Peter confronts Simon and corrects his wrong understanding of God's work. He strongly

corrects Simon's belief that the power of God is for sale. He tells him to look at his own heart because it is engulfed in evil desires. Even though Simon believed in Jesus, the way he viewed the world remained incorrect.

The story ends with questions. Did Simon listen to Peter and repent? Did he understand he couldn't buy God's power? Did he recognize his true need for God to change the evil in his heart?

Simon's view of the world centered around the power of magic and his desire to gain more power. Here, Simon has an opportunity to hear Peter's rebuke and change his way of thinking. Or, he can choose to continue following his lust for power and poison his relationship with God. The Bible doesn't tell us which choice he made.

Years later the gospel went to another center of magic, the city of Ephesus. Many people believed in Jesus Christ just as they did in Samaria. Unlike Simon, however, these people burned everything related to their own power and magic.

And many of those who had believed were coming, confessing and disclosing

their deeds. And a great number of those who practiced magic brought together their books and were burning them before everyone. When they counted the price of these, they discovered it was worth fifty thousand silver coins! (Acts 19:18-19)

What a difference! The worldview of the Ephesians changed when they believed in Christ. They didn't grab for more power. They destroyed the magic they possessed. They knew magic didn't fit with their new life in Christ.

So, how did the Ephesians come to understand magic didn't fit with their faith? Acts 19:8-10 tells us the apostle Paul stayed in Ephesus to teach these people for two years. The Ephesians learned about God's view of the world from him. When they understood the truth, the Ephesians stopped doing what didn't fit with God's desires. Simply, Paul taught them God's truth and God's truth taught them how to live.

It works the same for us. We learn God's Word and God's direction for the world, and this teaches us how to live. Paul tells us in Romans that the transformation process



begins in our hearts and minds. This leads to a change in our desires. If we desire to live our life according to God's ways and we see actions and thoughts that don't match his, we can let them go, with his help.

And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may appreciate what God's will is—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

The choice to act according to God's ways doesn't always come easily. We often like certain beliefs because we grew up with them. They feel natural to us. Or, maybe we fear change. But to live God's way we must trust him and allow him to change our hearts and our thoughts.

In the stories we just read, magic played a big part in the lives of the people who heard the gospel and believed in Christ. Why? One Bible scholar, Edwin M. Yamauchi, writes, "in religion one prays to the gods; in magic one commands the gods."<sup>1</sup>

Why do we find magic appealing? The magical expert helps clients gain power over

uncertainties in life by using rituals, spells, and potions. It's true we live life without the ability to control the future. What if we could know the future? Would we act more wisely? What if we could control negative events that come our way? Could we avoid harm and produce good instead? Of course we want to gain power over our future, but what does God say about this way of thinking and acting?

There must not be found among you any person who sacrifices his son or his daughter in the fire, who predicts the future, who reads the clouds, who reads omens, who casts a spell, who calls up various spirits, and who consults the dead. For everyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable things, the LORD your God is removing them from before you. You shall be blameless with Yahweh your God.

For these nations that you are removing listen to those who read clouds and who predict the future. But the LORD your God has not given anything like this to you. The LORD your God will raise up

a prophet from among you, from your brothers, like me [Moses] or you. To him you must listen. (Deuteronomy 18:10-15)

In the first part of the Bible, when God wanted his people Israel to hear a message, he sent it to them through a human messenger called a prophet. In time, the messages of the prophets became what we now call the Old Testament. The messages God wanted Israel to hear came from himself, not magic. Magic is not acceptable to God.

Later in the book of Deuteronomy Moses tells the people of Israel that God keeps some things hidden from us.

The hidden things belong to the LORD our God, but the uncovered things belong to us and to our children forever, so that we might do all the words of this law.  
(Deuteronomy 29:29)

Some knowledge belongs only to God, not us. We often would like to know more. But for whatever reason, God chooses not to reveal everything to us. Notice the second half of this

verse. God does reveal enough to allow us to obey him.

We may still believe more knowledge would help us feel in control and safe. But as we study God's word, we understand we live with limitations. The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes encourages us to accept our limitations and learn to trust God.

He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has given eternity in their heart, so that man might not find the work that God has done from the beginning until the end. I know that there is nothing better for them but to rejoice and to do good in one's life. (Ecclesiastes 3:11-12)

For I have given all this to my heart to make all this clear. The righteous person and the wise person and their works are in the hand of God. Whether love or whether hate, a person does not know anything that lies before him. (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

In these passages we see two things. First, everything God brings into our life has a place, even hard things and those that don't make sense. The overall picture turns out "beautiful, at the right time." Think of a rain storm. When it rains we may find it more difficult to walk places or keep everything dry. But in the end the rain makes things around us grow, and helps them gain strength and beauty. The rain provides food for plants. After the hardship of a storm comes beauty.

Second, God doesn't intend for us to know everything. Not even when difficult circumstances will turn beautiful. Just as we can't totally predict when a storm will let up, we can't know how and when difficult circumstances will turn beautiful. God doesn't intend for us to know everything, but he does expect us to trust him.

**Summary:**

When we accept the fact that we can't know or control everything, we reject a magical view of the world. People who practice magic seek to gain knowledge and exert power over things God never intended us to know or control. But

when we live with unknowns, something good happens. We learn to trust God more fully.

As the Ephesians did, we need to learn more about God in order to know the difference between falsehood and God's truth. The Ephesians left false beliefs about magic behind. We must learn to leave false beliefs behind as well.

The rest of this book will explain how to understand a biblical worldview so we can identify our false beliefs and let them go. Then we can follow God's way, even when hard things happen or when we don't know everything we would like to know.

## Questions: Chapter One

1. The Samaritan and Ephesian cultures used magic to help them understand and control life. What does your culture use in its effort to control uncertainties in life?
2. What do you do when you find yourself anxious about the future?
3. If you lived in a culture like Simon's or the Ephesians', how do you think you would react to learning about God?
  - a. Would you react like Simon, wanting to buy the power of God?
  - b. Or, would you respond like the Ephesians, being in awe of God and wanting to get rid of things that conflict with God's views?





## CHAPTER TWO

### How Did Our World Get Here?

In chapter one we observed how the Ephesians learned their practice of magic didn't fit with the reality of God's truth. Just as the Ephesians learned from Paul, we learn truth from God's Word. This helps us understand a biblical worldview. Then we can examine our own worldviews to evaluate what needs to change.

I divided the rest of this book into four parts, each part asking and answering a question to help us discover what a biblical worldview looks like.<sup>2</sup> Let's begin.

#### **How Did Our World Get Here?**

When we wake up in the morning and see trees, chickens, water, sky, children, and even ourselves, we witness God's creation. When we step on a path or look at a lake, we also view God's creation. But how did all this get here?

The Bible begins to answer this question with its opening line: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis

1:1). God, an uncreated being who had no beginning, and will have no end, created the entire universe. Unlike God, the universe had a beginning.

Scripture explains that God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit worked together to create our world. The following verse talks about how Jesus took part in the creation of all things:

In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through Him, and apart from Him not one thing came to be that has come to be. (John 1:1-3)

We also see that the Holy Spirit was involved in the creation of the world in Genesis 1:2 where the Spirit of God “hovered [like a bird] over the surface of the waters.”

As the Bible begins this story we find that the world could not sustain human life. Verse two of Genesis 1 explains two problems:

- 1) The earth had no form—it needed God to shape it.

2) The earth had nothing in it or on it—it needed God to fill it.

The rest of chapter one and chapter two tell us how God shaped and filled the world, all to fit the needs of human beings. God created a good and amazing world! These Bible passages assure us of God's good intentions toward human beings. He desires to bless us.

### **Who Rules?**

God created all things and he owns all things. God rules over all he created as a king.

The earth and everything that fills it belongs to the LORD, the world and those who dwell in it. For He founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. (Psalm 24:1-2)

For every animal of the forest, the beasts on a thousand mountains are Mine. I know every bird of the mountains, and the creatures that move around the field are Mine...the world and everything that fills it belongs to Me. (Psalm 50:10-11, 12b)

The sovereignty of God refers to his complete control over everything. He does whatever he pleases. He answers to no one. In the end, no one can successfully oppose him.

His authority is an eternal authority and His kingdom remains throughout every generation! And all who dwell on the earth are considered as nothing, and whatever He desires, He does—with the army of heaven and those who dwell on the earth. And there is no one who can strike His hand and say to Him, “What are you doing?” (Daniel 4:34b-35)

God reigned over the world (including both spiritual and physical beings) in the past. He reigns over the world in the present. And he will more directly reign in the future.

The Bible helps us understand how God reigns. On one hand, God is separate from his creation—far above it. The laws of nature that we must live by don't affect God. Natural events like storms hold no control over him like they do over us. Psalm 113:4-5 tells us about this:

The Lord is high over all nations,  
His glory is over the heavens.  
Who is like the LORD our God,  
who makes the place where He sits as  
king very high?

But God also stays close to his creation. He didn't create the world and then push it away, like pushing a boat out into the water with no one to guide it. God, the king of all creation, cares for his creation and acts within it. We should start these next verses with the same question in the verse above, "Who is like the LORD our God..."

Who lowers Himself to look into the  
heavens and into the earth,

Who raises the poor from the dust,

Who lifts the needy from the trash heap,  
to make them sit with the noble, with the  
nobles of His people,

Who makes the barren woman sit in her house as the joyful mother of children?  
(Psalm 113:6-9)

The awesome God of glory is also the amazing God of grace! In the beginning, he created the heavens and the earth, as if he created a boat to go on a journey. But God is also in the boat, on the journey with us, fully directing the journey. The Bible provides pictures of God caring for his creation. Many passages of Scripture talk about God as a shepherd who cares for his sheep. In one passage we learn God even guides and watches over the stars.

Lift up your eyes to the sky and see. Who created these [stars], the one who leads out their multitude by number? Each of them He calls by name. Because of His abundant power and mighty strength, not one is missing. (Isaiah 40:26)

Isaiah refers to God caring for the stars as a reminder that caring for us doesn't present a problem for God. If he can guide the stars of the heavens he certainly can guide, or

shepherd us too. We can trust God to take good care of us.

Like a shepherd He tends his flock  
[believers]; in His arm He gathers the  
lambs and He lifts them up to His chest.  
He leads the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:11)

**Summary:**

So, how did our world get here and who rules over it? One foundation of a biblical worldview is the reality that human beings live in a good world prepared by an awesome creator. God, our king, sustains the world he created and lovingly cares for those who live in it.

## Questions: Chapter Two

1. Think about the greatness of God. He created the whole universe out of nothing, just using his words. This God has no beginning and no end. Do you feel safe in his care?
2. Think back to the illustration of the boat. Describe a time when you felt the presence of God in your “boat.”
3. Describe a time when you felt you drifted alone in your boat. (Even at these times, the Bible assures us God remains present.)



## CHAPTER THREE

### What Does It Mean to be Human?

**W**e will now look at what it means to exist as a human in this world God created. Once again the book of Genesis helps us.

God gives us important information about ourselves in Genesis 1. He tells us he made us in his image. No other part of his creation wears his image, only humans.

And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. And let him rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the beasts and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." And God created the man in His image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.  
(Genesis 1:26-27)

According to verse 26, God makes a distinction between animals and humans.

Although we sometimes see similarities between animals and humans, such as breath, movement, and giving birth, God tells us humans differ. Humans carry God's image. Animals don't. Carrying the image of God doesn't make us God, however. Just as animals are like us in some ways and different in others, so we are like God in some ways and different in others.

God does something else unique with humans. On the sixth day of creation God blessed his human creation and gave them five commands.

And God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living creature that crawls on the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

What does this mean? God, the king of all creation, entrusts his rule on earth to his creation: humans. Humans take on the job of representing God and taking care of the earth. God gave Adam and Eve the following work to do:

- 1) Be fruitful (do meaningful, productive activities on the earth).
- 2) Increase (create families).
- 3) Fill the earth (enjoy this world and spread out in it).
- 4) Subdue the earth (maintain order and care for God's creation).
- 5) Rule over the earth (represent your king—God).

The writer of Psalm 8 expresses his own amazement about creation and the jobs God gives to humans. He is awed by God's relationship with mankind. Maybe you feel the same way.

When I see Your heavens, the works of  
Your fingers, the moon and stars that You  
set in place,

What are human beings, that You should  
remember them, and the sons of Adam,  
that You should be concerned about  
them?

You have made him [mankind] a little lesser than God and You crown him with glory and majesty.

You made him ruler over the works of Your hands,

You placed all things under his feet, flocks and cattle, and also, the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, what passes through the paths of the sea. (Psalm 8:3-8)

Back in Genesis 2, God gives Adam his first job—naming the animals. This task holds significance. When we name something or someone, we show authority over it. What do we usually do first when our children are born? We give them names and then take care of them. Giving Adam the authority to represent him, God gives Adam this job in the garden of Eden.

And the LORD God formed from the ground every living creature of the field and every flying creature of the heavens and He brought them to the man to see

what he would call them. And whatever the man called that living creature was its name. And the man gave names to every beast and to the flying creatures of the heavens and to every living creature of the field. (Genesis 2:19-20a)

Something else happened when Adam named the animals. Adam looked for someone like himself, someone else made in God's image. No such creature showed up. The Bible tells us God then formed a woman from Adam's side and brought her to him.

Adam showed great excitement when he saw her. He described her as "bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh." God designed this relationship between a man and a woman so the "the two would become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23-24). In Genesis 1 God tells us a male and female *together* make up his image.

And God created the man in His image,  
in the image of God He created him;  
male and female He created them.  
(Genesis 1:27)

This may seem confusing, but God shows us a picture of himself here. Part of the image of God includes “one” made up of more than one. God exists as three in one (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). In the same way, “man” can’t exist without male and female. Here’s the important part: neither the male nor the female reflects the image of God more or less than the other. *Together* they bear the image of God, and *together* they work to subdue and rule the earth. Remember, males *and* females wear the image of God.

**Summary:**

The second foundational piece of a biblical worldview is an understanding of how God created humans to inhabit his creation and represent him within it. Unlike animals, God made humans to wear the image of himself. He also gave humans jobs to do: to spread across the world and care for his creation.

## Questions: Chapter Three

1. If males and females together show the image of God, how should males and females treat each other?
2. Is one sex more important than the other, or does God value them equally?
3. How do you participate in the tasks God gave to Adam?
4. How can you better keep the earth beautiful?





## CHAPTER FOUR

### What Went Wrong?

**S**o far, we have learned how a biblical worldview puts human beings in a good world prepared by an awesome Creator. The creation of humans represents the high point of God's creation. God blessed mankind and commanded both male and female to rule over his world.

But something went terribly wrong! When humans rule we often experience suffering and observe people dominated by others. Different ethnic groups oppress each other; countries start wars; families and communities break apart. Even our environment—our earth—becomes more polluted and toxic each day.

War, sickness, pain, and death have invaded our world. Sooner or later sorrow stains the faces of everyone. The good world God created and the image of God on humanity seems hopelessly lost. Why?

Again, we find many answers in the book of Genesis. Genesis explains what happened

to the heavens and the earth when Adam and Eve sinned. It also tells us what happened to the family lines that came from the children of Adam and Eve.

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, the world changed. Disobedience led to hardship in life. Humans continue to endure hardships even today. Childbirth became more difficult for women. Work became more difficult for men. Rather than complementing one another, the sexes began battling against one another. We know that in generation after generation, every person dies and returns to the dust from which God formed him.

The apostle Paul says, “the creation became subject to futility” (Rom. 8:20a) and all creation is “enslaved to deterioration” (v. 21). The earth “groans together and suffers agony until now” (v. 22).

Do you see this around you? Do you know broken families? Do you experience times when the earth doesn't have enough water to bring forth food? These events show us how the good creation became cursed when sin came into the world.

## **Steam Rising from the Lake**

Have you ever gotten up in the morning and seen steam rising from a lake before the sun burns it off? Have you cooked over a fire and watched steam rise from a hot meal? If you try to grab this steam and hold it, you experience frustration. Steam disappears as soon as you close your hand around it.

The writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes uses this picture to help us understand our disturbed world. He uses the word “vapor” or “vanity.” Just as we cannot grasp steam over a fire, we can’t hold onto—or fully understand—events of life. For example, how do we make sense of the death of a young child or the senseless murder of a law-abiding person? Our experiences can leave us confused, frustrated, grieved, angry, or even depressed. God’s system of justice often makes no sense to us.

There is a vanity [vapor] that is done upon the earth: when righteous people get the consequences that should come to wicked people, and wicked people get the consequences that should come to righteous

people. I say that this also is vanity [a vapor]. (Ecclesiastes 8:14)

Ecclesiastes also links vanity (vapor) with “striving after wind.” Just as we can’t hold steam in our hand, we can’t capture wind. The phrase implies we fill certain parts of our daily lives with fruitless tasks. Piling up material possessions mimics “vanity and striving after wind” because the person who piles up possessions dies and leaves everything to someone else.

And I hated all my labor that I had labored for under the sun that I will leave for the man who comes after me. And who knows if he will be a wise person or a fool? But he will become master over all my labor that I have labored and that I have acted wisely to gain under the sun. This is also vanity! (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19)

We face a harsh reality. All people die. Even the best people die. Ecclesiastes 12:7 describes it this way: “And the dust will return to the earth as it was and the spirit will return to the God who gave it.”

Life for us holds the pain of death since Adam and Eve sinned. And we face another harsh reality. Something happened to the heavens and the earth because of sin.

What is bent cannot become straight  
and what is lacking cannot be counted.  
(Ecclesiastes 1:15)

See the work of God. For who is able to  
straighten what He has bent? (Ecclesiastes  
7:13)

Wait. Did that last verse tell us God bent the world? Yes. In response to Adam and Eve's sin, God bent the world! The world no longer works the way it did in the beginning.

The author of Ecclesiastes goes on to talk about the condition of our hearts:

There is not a righteous person on the  
earth who does what is good and never  
sins. (7:20)

God made man upright [straight], but  
they sought out many evil schemes. (7:29)

Now we can easily see what happened to God's good creation and humanity. Though created "straight," human beings chose to bend themselves and *God bent the world in response*.

### **God Washes the World**

Even though God bent the world, he still loves and works with his creation. In Genesis 6 we learn how evil men's actions became. Yet God chose to "wash" the world with a flood, saving only Noah and his family.

Now the earth became spoiled before God and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was spoiled, for all the people had spoiled their way upon the earth. (Genesis 6:11-12)

We might think God washing the earth with a flood would solve the problem, but Noah and his family brought the disease of sin with them into the cleaned-up world. Once again, sin spread.

Later, God started with another new "family." He worked with the family of Abraham and created a nation from him—

Israel. But again, Old Testament history shows that Israel spread the same disease of sin and corrupted the land God gave them. The disease still spreads through the human race, and the world remains bent.

### **Living in a Domain of Darkness**

What do we face as we live in this bent world? First, the apostle Paul describes the world after sin as “the domain of darkness” (Colossians 1:13; Acts 26:18). Most people never realize it, but we are all born citizens of an oppressive kingdom. The dark kingdom we live in promotes harmful values and beliefs. Much of the population of the world follows these values and beliefs.

Ephesians 2:2-3 speaks of people living according to a “pattern” set by the world. The exact pattern changes from generation to generation and culture to culture. But here’s the basic problem: we leave God out of how we think and act.

Paul describes the ruler of this dark kingdom. He refers to him as “the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). In 2 Corinthians 4:4 he identifies him as “the

god of this world.” Jesus speaks of “the ruler of this world” in the book of John (vv. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Each of these titles refers to the devil, or Satan.

A biblical view of the world also shows us the reality of evil spiritual beings called demons. Demons help Satan and oppose God. They originally existed as angels, created by God. At some point, they rebelled. Some demons hold positions in a highly organized leadership structure, like a government, with Satan as the highest leader.

...because our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual beings of evil in the heavenly places.  
(Ephesians 6:12)

Not only do we live in a darkened, bent world, we also battle an enemy. The devil reigns as the number-one enemy of mankind. The Bible tells us from the beginning the devil, or Satan, used lies as his most powerful weapon. He used them in the Garden of Eden when he defeated Adam and Eve. He used



them all through human history and still uses lies today. In the book of John, Jesus calls the devil “a liar and the father of lies...truth is not in him. Whenever he speaks the lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of them all” (John 8:44b).

Not only does the devil lie, he also fills the world with numerous lies. The lies sound so good, people believe them. Lies get promoted while truth gets thrown to the side. Whole cultures and communities develop based on a mixture of truth and lies.

For example, in the United States many people believe God exists. However, most of these people don't believe they need to read the Bible to understand God. They like to create their own ideas about God and what he desires for his creation. Here's the mix of truth and lies. The truth: God exists. The lie: people can define him.

Generations come and go, each viewing the world through varying degrees of truth and untruth. The devil (Satan) desires to pull people of all cultures away from God with his lies, such as the lie described above. With his lies and opposition to God, Satan causes most of the evil and brokenness in the world.

Notice I stated Satan causes *most* of the evil in the world. What else contributes to the brokenness we see every day? Human beings contribute to the brokenness in this world. Our flesh, or our human way of thinking, contains sin. Therefore, we behave in sinful ways. When acting in the flesh, we do what comes naturally. The flesh longs to get what it wants and do what it wants. Selfish, prideful thoughts and actions come from this, which contribute to the brokenness in our world.

Two of the problems we discussed, the darkness of the world and the ruler of the world, live outside of us (except when a demonic being enters and takes over someone's life). The flesh, on the other hand, exists inside us. Because sin resides inside, we must deal with it every day.

Satan loves to use our sinful nature against us. He knows we struggle to obey God and say no to our flesh. When we choose to ignore God, the devil gladly helps us believe the lie that living apart from God works better.

What accounts for the evil and brokenness of life?

1. Our enemy, the devil.

2. Adam and Eve's sin and the spread of sin from generation to generation and culture to culture.
  
3. Our dark world, bent by God as a result of Adam and Eve's sin.

**Summary:**

To understand and live in the brokenness of this world we need to know what we face that opposes God's original creation. We face two obstacles on the outside: a bent world and Satan. We face one obstacle on the inside: our sinful flesh. God desires us to live godly lives in spite of this. But how? Let's keep reading.

## Questions: Chapter Four

1. What are the three things we struggle against since Adam and Eve sinned?
2. Which of these creates the greatest struggle for you?
3. I brought hard realities of life to this chapter. I ended with the hope that God will provide what we need to live in this world. Name one area of your life where you need hope to know God can help you overcome darkness.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### What's the Remedy?

**H**ow can we move from a path of brokenness and insecurity to a path of wholeness and security? Can our sick world ever find healing? Will God unbend what he bent because of man's disobedience? God answers these questions in the Bible too.

#### **The First Promise**

Satan appeared to Adam and Eve as a serpent when he defeated them in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Because of this, God cursed the serpent and the ground. Importantly, God did not curse Adam and Eve. In addition to not cursing Adam and Eve God gave them a promise, a flicker of hope, even though creation would endure a curse and life would be difficult. When God judged the serpent, he said:

I will place hostility between you and the woman and between your descendant and

her descendant. He will bruise you on the head and you will bruise him on the heel. (Genesis 3:15)

God hinted at the future here. This verse tells us that the serpent (representing the devil) would fight against the family of Adam and Eve and all their descendants. Eventually one of their descendants would enter the world and receive a wound from the devil. This same person would stomp on the devil's head, delivering a fatal blow. Here, God gives Adam and Eve a hint about Jesus Christ, the "Second Adam."

### **Two Adams**

The New Testament reveals the full story of the Second Adam. The first Adam (the Adam of creation) brought sin, suffering, sickness, and death into the world. He caused humans to lose their rest in the Garden of Eden and to lose dominion over the earth.

The Second Adam does the opposite. He brings forgiveness, healing, joy, life, and transformation to humans. The Second Adam (Jesus) will restore the heavens and the earth

too. He will eventually unbend creation, restoring it to God's original intent.

Paul describes the first Adam and the Second Adam like this:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep [died]. For since death came through a man, so also through a man will come the resurrection of the dead. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each will be made alive in his own group: Christ the first fruits, then those who are Christ's when he comes, then the end, when He will hand over the kingdom to God the Father, when He will render powerless every ruler and every authority and power. For it is necessary for him to reign until He has placed all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be rendered powerless is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

Sometimes we think of salvation in a limited way. We think about how salvation brings personal forgiveness of sins and eternity with

God in heaven. But Jesus promises more. He promises to restore the whole universe!

Remember how we learned in Romans 8 that “the creation became subject to futility” (v. 20) and even now all creation remains “enslaved to deterioration” (v. 21)? One day, the suffering and groaning of creation will end. Slavery to deterioration will cease. Pure joy, without sorrow, will begin. Paul explains, “For the eager expectation of the creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God” (v. 19).

### **Overcoming Challenges in a Bent World**

Until the suffering of creation ends, we need to learn how to live in a bent world and honor God at the same time. Just as Paul taught the Ephesians how to do this, the Bible also teaches us. What is a biblical view of how to live on earth, no matter when or where we live?

The New Testament book of Colossians tells us God the Father “rescued us from the domain [power] of the darkness and moved us into the Kingdom of the Son He loves” (v. 1:13).



Imagine it this way. Think of owning a passport. Your passport tells authorities the country you come from—it identifies you with that country. Every human has a passport that says we belong to the kingdom of darkness. At birth, you and I both belonged to the kingdom of darkness. Now imagine God ripping up that passport and handing you a new passport that says you belong to his kingdom. If we believe in Jesus, we don't have to imagine this. We no longer belong to this dark world, nor do its laws apply to us. We now enjoy citizenship in heaven, even though for a time we live here on earth as “aliens” (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11).

So, we no longer belong to this dark world. But what about our enemy, the devil, and his demonic realm? The New Testament tells us Jesus reigns with highest authority and sits at God's right hand. He reigns over the devil who, unlike Jesus, exists as a created being.

Jesus died for our sins. First Peter 3 tells us he then went to “the spirits in prison” (most likely the angels who rebelled against God during the days of Noah) and announced his victory over them (v. 19). Jesus sits “at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven” with “angels and authorities and powers subjected

to Him” (v. 22). Yes, the devil and his demons still maintain power and sometimes we experience it. But Jesus put limits on that power. Jesus defeated the devil and his demons by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

We still battle inside ourselves with our flesh and our sinfulness. The cure for the flesh is the Holy Spirit. God gives the Holy Spirit to everyone who places his faith in Jesus. The Spirit helps us overcome those things that naturally pull us down.

Walk by the Spirit and you most certainly will not carry out fleshly desires. For the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are opposed to one another, so you may not do what you want. (Galatians 5:16-17)

Earlier in this book we talked about God’s connection with his creation. This remains true. The apostle Paul argues in Romans 5-8 that since we are now God’s children, God is “for us” (Romans 8:31). He gave us the best gift we could ever receive—his Son, who died for our sins. If God sent his Son, it makes

sense he will not withhold anything we could possibly need in order to live a life pleasing to him.

God gives us the ability to overcome our flesh through his Holy Spirit. Walking by the Spirit doesn't mean living a perfect life. It doesn't mean trying harder to keep rules by our own natural abilities. When we try to live perfectly on our own, we end up hiding and covering our failures. We can't produce godliness from inside ourselves. Trying to do this leads to frustration, discouragement, and living a dishonest life.

Walking by the Spirit means something else. It means, with the Spirit's help, we remind ourselves God changed us. We can turn away from sin and choose to do right things instead of the fleshly things, which come naturally to us. The apostle Paul says to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). We need the Spirit's help to live dead to sin. Paul says, "by the Spirit we put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13).

The choice to walk by the Spirit instead of our flesh challenges us multiple times per day. Until Jesus comes, man's flesh will fight against

the Spirit. Let's pay attention and choose to rely on the Spirit. Relying on him gives us the ability to do the right thing instead of giving in to sin.

**Summary:**

Although God bent the world in response to sin, he doesn't leave us in this bent world alone. God sent his Son, Jesus, to save us from our sin and rescue us from this world of darkness. When we receive this rescue, by faith, God's Holy Spirit comes to live within us. He helps transform our hearts, enabling us to fight against the flesh.

## Questions: Chapter Five

1. We learned we can live in a bent world by depending on the Holy Spirit to help us make good choices. What kinds of choices do you face every day? For example, do you treat others badly when you can't always get your own way?
  
2. Do you pray to God for the Holy Spirit to help you make good choices, even when you don't feel like doing the right thing?

Write a one sentence prayer here:

3. List some examples of how you forget to rely on the Holy Spirit in your life.



## CHAPTER SIX

### The Kingdom of God on Display

**A** biblical view of the world helps us make sense of our world and teaches us how to live biblically within it. We know God created the world as good. Even though he bent the world in response to the rebellion of Adam and Eve, he still desires to bless us and help us live godly lives.

What does all this mean in everyday life? Becoming a Christian and adopting a biblical worldview means leaving the values of this dark world behind. It means learning God's values and following a new way of being human, which Jesus Christ modeled for us. We must choose to imitate Jesus through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Maturing as a Christian doesn't happen in an instant. Think of a mango tree. Mangos ripen over time. They mature and grow from nourishment delivered through the tree. Growing as a Christian may be compared to that.

Christians continue to ripen or mature throughout life. Even though we don't achieve total maturity here on earth, we should continually strive to keep growing in our relationship with God. How do we do this? We must nourish ourselves with Bible study and prayer. The Bible teaches us how Jesus lived and also allows us to understand how to pray biblically.

Let's think about prayer for a moment. One culture may see prayer as a way to control or manipulate god.<sup>3</sup> Christianity, however, sees the true God as the ultimate Master to whom we bow and present petitions. Let's not forget he reigns as sovereign king of the universe.

Remember I mentioned we don't reach total maturity here on earth? The good news is we can serve God while we grow. Unlike a mango, which must ripen before being enjoyed, we don't have to reach perfect maturity before God uses us. We can live for him and serve him from the moment of salvation until we go home to heaven.

### **What about Culture?**

At the beginning of this book, I talked about culture and how the culture we grow up



in shapes how we think of ourselves and the world around us. That is, it shapes our worldview. When we believe in Jesus we must evaluate and understand our own culture. This allows us to examine which parts of our view of the world line up with a biblical worldview and which don't. When we recognize what doesn't line up, we can remove those sinful thoughts and actions from our lives, just like the Ephesians threw their magic tools into the fire.

How do people living in darkness see what the gospel and the transformation of a life means? As believers live, showing a pattern of imitating Jesus, they put the kingdom of God on display. The way we live gives others a picture of the character of God.

Growing as a Christian and displaying God present struggles, however. We face temptations daily. When temptations come we need to realize our flesh wants us to do what comes naturally—to sin. When we recognize this, the Holy Spirit can help us resist sin and choose to imitate Jesus.

As an example, showing kindness when we don't get our own way puts God's character on display. On the other hand, degrading a

person in anger puts our flesh on display. To impact culture for Christ, we must make sure we continually allow God to transform our hearts, which leads to godly actions.

### **From Darkness to Light**

Salvation means more than stacking new beliefs on top of old beliefs. It means more than adding new behaviors and rituals to our lives, like baptism, communion, or attending church. Becoming a Christian means turning away from one way of life and turning toward another way of life. It means leaving patterns of the old Adam (sin) behind, and following the pattern of the new Adam, Jesus Christ. Paul tells us about this in Ephesians:

So, I say this and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer live like unbelievers live—with futile minds with darkened understandings, excluded from the life of God. Their ignorance comes from callous and insensitive hearts. They have given themselves over to a lack of self-control so that they pursue all kinds of impurity with greediness.

But you did not learn Christ like this (if you truly heard and were taught in the truth about Jesus)—that you lay aside, relative to your former conduct, the old person that is being corrupted by deceptive desires and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind and put on the new man, which according to God has been created in the righteousness and holiness that the truth brings. (Ephesians 4:17-24)

As we have already noted, the Bible portrays unbelieving people as citizens of a dark kingdom (Colossians 1:13; Acts 26:18). They know nothing other than darkness. Darkness seems normal to them. People living this way exclude God from their lives. This leaves them with “futile minds,” with “darkened understandings,” and “ignorant” about important truths.

...They did not glorify God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their foolish heart became dark... Therefore God gave them over to the desires of their hearts, to uncleanness so

that their bodies were dishonored among them. (Romans 1:21, 24)

What breaks through this darkness? Only the light of the gospel can break through and allow people to really understand.

The God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” this One shined in our hearts with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

He rescued us from the domain of the darkness and moved us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. (Colossians 1:13)

God spoke light into existence at creation. And down through the ages, God shines light into the hearts of countless people formerly unaware of his kingdom. People who stumbled around in the dark now stand in the light. People who obeyed the god of this world now pledge allegiance to King Jesus!

When people believe in Jesus, we hope they don't simply lay the gospel on top of their existing worldview. Rather, we hope the gospel

blasts false worldviews away and lays a new foundation in its place.

### **How to Live in the Light**

The Holy Spirit gives us the power to change from the inside out and helps us live in the light. The person who walks in the Spirit refuses to hide what's on the inside. This person doesn't try, by his own efforts, to look better on the outside only. God wants our hearts *and* actions transformed. He doesn't want us to think and live like everyone around us. When we understand all God has done for us, shouldn't we want to offer ourselves back to him by changing our actions to reflect *his* worldview?

Paul helps us understand what it means to allow the Holy Spirit to help us grow. In fact, he speaks quite directly and forcibly about our need to change and live godly lives.

I urge you, brothers, by means of the mercies of God to present your bodies as sacrifices—living, holy, and acceptable to God, your reasonable service of worship. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of

your mind, so that you may appreciate what God's will is—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

The Bible declares God's thoughts and helps us see life from his point of view. For this reason, we need to read the Bible regularly and reflect on it thoughtfully. Believers should seek to learn from those who understand the Bible well. Over time this transforms the way we view the world.

### **A Present Example of Living Transformed in Marriage**

The gospel not only lights up the path leading to forgiveness and eternal life, it reveals a new, better way to live that allows others to see God. Believers, with the help of the Holy Spirit, should put God on display by how they choose to live. This is a big responsibility.

Consider these scenarios:

What if in a marriage:

- People see Christians as the best citizens in a village, town, or country—not because of their words, but because of their actions?

- Christian men are known as servant leaders who love their wives sacrificially, who typically lay down their own desires and interests to meet the needs of their wives?
- Christian women love their husbands passionately, seeking to build them up and treating them with respect?
- All Christians live fully committed to acting as people of God.

Sometimes a biblical worldview and cultural worldviews clash. This is true in marriage and in many other areas of our lives. When a clash happens, we have a choice. Do we choose to display God by acting in a way he says is right or do we choose to follow our culture? Let's look at two examples:

- When culture says, "A wife exists to meet her husband's sexual desires," a Christian husband knows how to lovingly ask for, rather than force, sexual engagement with his wife.
- When culture says, "The greatest man fathers the most children (or perhaps has the most wives)," a Christian man follows

the pattern of one wife, established with the creation of Adam of Eve.

### **Israel and Us—Transformed Communities**

In the Old Testament, God intended the nation of Israel to act like a magnet. If the nation lived differently than the nations around it, Israel would attract the attention of others. Foreigners would come take a closer look at this strange group of people so unlike any others. Moses told Israel:

See, I have taught you statutes and judgments according to what the LORD my God commanded me, so that you might do them in the midst of the land where you are entering there to inherit. And you shall carefully do them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding before the peoples. When they hear all these statutes, then they will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people!” (Deuteronomy 4:5-6)

The problem? Many times the Israelites failed to act differently. They often behaved



just as badly as everyone else, and sometimes worse. In fact, the prophet Isaiah said that because of how Israel lived, “all day long, God’s name was constantly disrespected!” (Isaiah 52:5).

In the New Testament, God sends the Holy Spirit to live within his people. If we submit to his leading through the power of the Holy Spirit, our hearts can undergo transformation. It’s our turn to transform communities. If we as believers allow the Holy Spirit to change our hearts and thinking, and from this choose godly living, the light of God will shine out to people close enough to observe it. In this way, whether by our marriages or other parts of our lives, we display God and bring the gospel—the true Light—into this darkened world.

### **Summary**

Let’s remember God cares for his creation. He wants us to experience a close relationship with him. As believers, he’s given us a new passport and a new home. He defeated our enemy, Satan, and gives believers the Holy Spirit to transform our thinking and actions.

What should we do with this information? We should thank our awesome God for

loving us. We also need to imitate Jesus so we become ripe, or mature, like good tasting mangos. Let's listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance as we study the Bible and pray. Demonstrate a life that reflects a biblical worldview and allow false cultural beliefs to fall away. And then, let's teach others.

## Questions: Chapter Six

1. As Christians, we should learn to imitate Jesus. How do you think others see Jesus when they look at your life?
2. When your culture teaches you to do one thing, but God's word tells you to do something else, what will you choose? Remember, God gives believers the Holy Spirit to help make the right choice when we face this situation.
3. List one example of where your culture might clash with God's truth. Pray now that you will remember to ask for God's strength to make the right choice.



## CONCLUSION

**W**e all grow up with a worldview. The question this book raises is how should our worldview change when we believe in Jesus? Do we simply stack new knowledge of God on top of the things we already believe or do we re-evaluate what our culture taught us and toss away false thinking?

Let's remember every culture sees the world both truly and falsely. We should affirm true values and confront false ones, even if this brings a negative reaction from others. In this way, we honor and display God in our families, churches, and communities.

We saw that living according to a biblical worldview can present challenges. We need to keep these truths close to our hearts:

- We have an enemy named Satan. God still reigns over this created being, even as he tries to spread his lies and keep people in bondage. In this dark world we need to stand firm against Satan's lies.
- The world remains bent, or dark, because of sin. God will one day straighten and

restore his creation. But until then, we need to live godly lives in a darkened world.

- The Spirit, given to all believers, enables us to live God's way and say no to the sin within ourselves. For this to happen, we need to let him teach and lead us.
- Maturing as a believer in Jesus happens when we faithfully study the Bible and pray.

If we follow God's command to spread the gospel and teach others, transforming our worldview to match God's is essential. Remember the witch doctor and his clients at the beginning of this book? What if each person who prayed a prayer of faith that day grew to understand God's truths and tossed away false beliefs? All of them would put God on display, even if it cost them a career or some other comfort. Think how the changes in these new believers would affect everyone around them, perhaps bringing many others out of bondage into the freedom of faith in God.

What about you? Will you trust God with your future? Will you toss away your own false

beliefs, even at a cost? Are you willing to live according to a biblical worldview and spread God's truth? If so, let's continue to spread the good news of the gospel and put God on display with our lives!





## GOOD NEWS FOR YOU

**T**his book identifies some of the harsh realities of living in this world. It also identifies God's Son, Jesus Christ, as our hope to live a godly life despite the difficulties we face in the world.

The book talks about growing in a relationship with Jesus. How can we do this? How can we know for sure that our sins have been forgiven and we will live forever with Jesus when our life on earth ends?

The Bible tells us to “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31 NIV). What exactly does this mean? Let's review other scriptures to understand this verse more fully:

- The Bible teaches us that in the beginning God created a perfect world, which he declared to be “very good” (Gen. 1:1, 31).
- The humans God created and placed in the world disobeyed him. In that instant, sin entered the world and separated us from God (Gen. 2:4-3:24).
- Yet God desires a relationship with his creation and loves each of us. “For God

so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

- To come to God, we first need to recognize we live separate from him. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).
- Here’s the good news of the gospel: God sent his Son, Jesus, to die on a cross and pay the price for our sins. He was buried and rose from the dead on the third day, defeating death and sin. “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ [Jesus] died for us” (Rom. 5:8).
- We can accept the payment for our sins that Jesus made for us. We can trust him to save us from our sin and bring us into relationship with God. “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

### **How to Accept the Gift of Salvation:**

The only requirement to receiving this gift is to believe these truths:

- 1) God created us and loves us.
- 2) Each one of us was born with sin and we continue to sin throughout our lives.
- 3) Jesus died and paid the price for our sins.
- 4) Jesus, through his death and resurrection, offers us the gift of forgiveness.
- 5) When we repent (turn away from sin) and accept salvation (turn to God to rescue us), we become part of God's family forever.

### **A Sample Prayer for Salvation:**

Dear God, thank you for loving me and sending your Son to die on the cross for me. I realize I am a sinner and I need forgiveness for my sins. I accept your Son's payment for my sins on the cross. Thank you that Jesus won over death and rose from the dead. Thank you for accepting me into your family and giving me life with you forever. Please help me follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit while I live here on earth.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Magic in the Biblical World,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983), 174-75.
- 2 Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), Kindle locations 542-544.
- 3 Hiebert, Kindle Locations 6348-6349.

