

## Introduction

Farmland dominates our American Midwestern landscape. The flat fields stretch on for miles in parallel rows of beans and corn. In the growing season, the breeze can make the acres of corn appear as a sea of gentle green waves. And in the harvest season, the golden fields gleam in the sun. In some areas, these rolling plains of crops span out seemingly endlessly. Occasionally, in the middle of hundreds of acres of crops stands a giant, magnificent oak tree. Its outline provides such a contrast to everything around it. Protruding from the flat field is the trunk of a majestic tree that could have been growing for more than a century. Over the course of claiming and tilling the ground, all the lesser trees have been removed, but the oak stands firm. Each year, the crops come and go, but the oak stands firm. The prairie winds blow violently, but the oak stands firm. Some praise the majestic height of the redwood or the sequoia's girth, but the oak's strength is unparalleled. It stands alone in the fiercest of storms because its roots run deep. In the chaos of life, it is unmoved.

The mighty oak interrupting the landscape of impermanent growth provides a picture of stability that corresponds to a person rooted in the truth of God's Word. The Bible uses the image of a tree to present a life shaped by faith in God and serious study of His Word. "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (Ps. 1:3). Like the oak that weathers all the storms, the person who has deep-seated faith and whose roots are nourished in God's Word withstands the challenges and chaos of life. This person has the stability of the unmoving tree. He makes the right choices

and “walks not in the counsel of the wicked” (1:1) but pursues the path of righteousness.

What leads to this stability and the ability to make wise decisions? The psalmist gives two grounding realities: delighting in God’s Word and deep-seated faith in God’s Deliverer. The psalmist introduces the Book of Psalms by telling us to dwell on God’s Word (Ps. 1) and trust in God’s Deliverer (Ps. 2). From the rest of the Bible, we recognize that the Deliverer, described as the King and God’s Son in Psalm 2, is Jesus Christ (Acts 4:25-26; 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). The command to “Kiss the Son” is a command to embrace His kingly rule, to submit to Him. So, the first and most important decision is to trust in Christ for salvation. When the apostles reflect on Psalm 2, they declare “that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38). Flowing from true faith is a desire for God’s Word. The person who trusts in God’s Son has new desires, and “his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (1:2). What keeps this person stable, grounded, and persevering are his unflagging faith in the Son of God and unwavering commitment to God’s Word.

Often, college years can be times of instability and uncertainty about one’s faith. However, they can also be a time of significant spiritual growth and deepening faith. For both of us, college years dramatically affected our faith and set us on a trajectory of faith and ministry for the rest of our lives. Jon came to faith in the eighth grade from a non-Christian background and was never really rooted in discipleship through high school. Once at college, a church and college ministry imparting truth through biblical teaching and life-on-life discipleship transformed his trajectory. Trent’s parents came to faith during college, changing the direction of the home where he grew up. Neither of us attended a Christian undergraduate school, but we have spent most of our professional lives ministering to college students at a Christian university.

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In our experience with various college ministries (at Christian and secular schools), we have seen that students from similar backgrounds can be radically different at the end of four years. What accounts for this difference? Why are the college years a catalyst for Christian growth for some and a cause of struggle for others? The burden of our hearts is to help you to grow in your faith during your college years. We pray that when you graduate, you will be characterized by steadfast faith. Our prayer is that you will not be moved by every new thought, cultural movement, or peer pressure that you meet. We pray that you will be planted in truth so that you are steadfast and stable.

We have written this book to help plant students in the Christian Scriptures and faith in the Christian Deliverer. We want to see them choose the path of righteousness. We encourage students to believe in God and dwell on His Word. College presents students with new decisions and the latest ideas, and students have questions. This book is our attempt to root students in the Scriptures and explain the paths of righteousness and wickedness. It is a combination of explanation of Scripture and wisdom drawn from decades of ministry to college students.

Each chapter aims to be an accessible introduction to a topic that merits a deeper discussion. We expect that many readers will want fuller treatment of many of these topics, and those larger volumes are available. The book has four categories, each with five chapters: Christian Living, Christian Vocation, Christian Apologetics, and Christian Relationships and Dating. Each chapter concludes with reflection questions that could be useful for the reader personally or in a small group setting.

We wrote this book prayerfully to help ground you in biblical truth and wisdom. Our prayer for you is that you will be **ROOTED IN TRUTH**.

## **Part 1**

### **Christian Living**

## **Gospel**

### **How do I become a Christian?**

Have you ever seen someone's life change in radical ways? I am not talking about some superficial or contrived change, but a change that transforms a person's core so that his hopes and desires are different. When I (Trent) was in high school, I served in the greeting ministry at my church. A visitor came to church one day. He was not hard to spot as a visitor because he did not know where to go, seemed nervous, used more colorful language, and told stories about life choices that were not following the Lord. He was struggling to make a connection until he spotted Danny. Danny was a deacon in the church who radiated godliness and servant-heartedness. When he saw Danny, his face lit up, and his demeanor changed—he had made a connection and felt like he could stay. His next statement shocked me, "If Danny can be a Christian, then anybody can." To me, Danny was the picture of godliness and following the Lord. But he and Danny had been close friends before Danny became a Christian. He did not know about the radical life change in Danny's life. In that church lobby, there stood two men who could not be more different in their lifestyles and their deepest hopes. But twenty years earlier, their lives were indistinguishable. Danny had come to faith in Jesus, and his life had been transformed. This is what is often called conversion.

The term “conversion” carries different connotations across cultures. In the West, “conversion” rings of arrogant and abusive colonialism. In the Middle East, “conversion” can be punishable with severe consequences, even death. However, “conversion” simply means moving from one position or state to another. In some contexts (e.g., converting currency or biochemical bodily processes), conversion is not freighted with such weight and heightened emotion. However, in the context of a person’s most closely held beliefs and identity, it is right for “conversion” to be recognized as a term of utmost significance. In the religious context, conversion is the fundamental changing of allegiance—the complete reorientation of one’s life.

“Conversion,” or becoming a Christian, is not a new issue. For nearly two millennia, Christians have told others of the truth about Jesus Christ and how he has changed their lives. It can be asked, “How do I become a Christian?” But that question really does not get to the motivation for change. Before someone asks “How?” he is likely to ask “Why?” So often the most critical response is to answer the question of “Why should I become a Christian.” As the message about Jesus Christ comes to new ears, this has often been the question because the message about Jesus calls for a response. One of the first people to understand the reality about Jesus, exclaimed, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). If, as this man realized, salvation is at stake, then the answer to this question is of the utmost importance. The response is just as straightforward as the question: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Although the response is simple, the response and the question assume answers to several other questions. From what do I need to be saved? Who is Jesus? How has He provided salvation? What does it mean to believe?

## **What is the gospel?**

To answer these questions, we need to think about the Bible as a whole, not merely one dialogue recorded in the Book

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of Acts. The central message of Christianity is the gospel. "Gospel" means good news. And in the Christian sense of "gospel," it is the good news about Jesus. We might say it simply: the gospel is the good news that God saves sinners through Jesus Christ. The gospel primarily focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus and declares that the kingdom of God has come. This is not a new message. It is the message that Jesus came to proclaim. Mark describes the ministry of Jesus in this way: Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). The gospel is the message about the saving activity of God explained in four acts: God's creation, humanity's rebellion, God's provision, and humanity's response. In short, we might describe the significant movements in this drama as God-Human-God-Human.

## *GOD*

God designed the world so that He might have a relationship with humanity. From the first human beings down to every person alive today, God loves and blesses human beings. With the first humans, the Bible describes this relationship as them existing with God in an idyllic garden called Eden. God showed them who He was and how to relate to Him. And God continues to reveal something about Himself to all people through what is seen in nature: "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:19-20). People should respond to this revelation of God by worshipping Him as God and seeking to know Him. They should embrace a relationship with God and worship Him.

## *HUMAN*

Tragically, the beauty and glory of this relationship was marred by humanity's rebellion against God. Instead of reveling in

the joy of a relationship with God, human beings reject that relationship and seek their own way. Beginning with the first humans, and including every human being after them, people have sinned against God and rejected any relationship with Him. The tragic human story is one of seeking purpose, fulfillment, and meaning apart from God, and coming up empty. God's response to Adam and Eve's rebellion involves both just judgment and astounding grace. Because God is holy and without sin, He is angry with them about their sin. He removes them from His presence and expresses His just wrath toward them.

One consequence of man's sin is death, both physically and spiritually, in becoming distanced from God. Romans 3:22–23 explains that all people sin and thus are incapable of life with God: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." Moreover, "...the wages of sin is death..." (Rom. 6:23). That is, life is the reward of a relationship with God and humans have earned death for themselves by severing their relationship with God. People are as bad off as they could be, wallowing in sin, under the wrath of God, and incapable of helping themselves. Humanity, along with all creation, is marred by this fall into sin. When death and degradation enter the world, their effects spread beyond humanity.

## *GOD*

The story could end with all people condemned justifiably for their sins. But God's story does not end in death: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 3:23). God the Father sent God the Son in the power of God the Spirit to redeem humanity and restore all creation—the Triune God sets out to rescue. The Son of God came to live as a human and bear the penalty that their sin deserves (Phil. 2:5–11). He died a gruesome death on the cross in their place. The Bible describes this as the great exchange: our guilt for Jesus' pardon, our sin for Jesus' righteousness: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew



no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

God's Son, Jesus, is the Author of life, and death is powerless over Him. He rose from the dead and lives victoriously. The gospel promises that we can share in and enjoy Jesus' resurrection victory. Humanity can have life with God because God in Christ has made it possible: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (Rom. 5:8-9). It is crucial to understand that the work of salvation is not something that any mere human could accomplish. Jesus Christ as fully human (and thus able to stand in our place and die) and fully God (and thus able to bear God's wrath completely and overcome death victoriously) accomplished the work of salvation. That is the good news of the gospel—Jesus Christ has done what we could not. The gospel is about the work of God in Christ, especially His death and resurrection, to provide salvation for all people who trust in him.

### *HUMAN*

If Jesus accomplished this salvation, does that mean everyone experiences salvation and new life in Jesus Christ? The Bible tells us that while the gospel is available to every person, not every person experiences salvation. The gospel demands a response. Recall what Paul said to the Philippian jailor, "'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved'" (Acts 16:31). The gospel demands that every person respond in repentance and faith. Repentance is turning from sin and turning to God. It involves the recognition that the promises of sin are false and hollow and the recognition that God is true and all-satisfying. Faith is deciding to depend on Jesus for salvation. It involves the recognition that nothing of this world can provide meaning to life and provide everlasting life. Elsewhere Paul describes the response like this: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in