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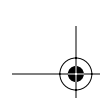
THE LIE AND THE TRUTH

The most important aspect of faith is our mental picture of God. The way we actually envision God may not be reflected in the theology we articulate. When asked what we think about God, we may recite all the orthodox attributes—love, omniscience, omnipotence—while entertaining a mental picture of God that is unloving and severely limited. Yet our actual picture of God, not our theoretical knowledge about God, most influences how we feel about him. It's impossible to enjoy a genuinely passionate and loving relationship with God when our mental picture of him doesn't inspire passionate love.

Our picture of God not only influences our emotional response to God, it strongly influences our understanding of everything else in our life. Most significant for the purposes of this book, it influences how we interpret suffering and evil in our life. Does Melanie see the hand of God at work in the death of her child, or does she interpret it in some other fashion? It all depends on her picture of God. It is most biblical and most helpful not to see God involved in the evils in this world but to interpret it in some other fashion.

We will begin by looking at Genesis 2—3, which demonstrate that at the root of everything contrary to God's original design for humanity is a lie about God that causes us to question his character. Following this,





we will examine God's answer to this lie: the person of Jesus Christ. All of our thinking about God must begin and end with his revelation of himself in his incarnate Son.

THE SERPENT'S LIE

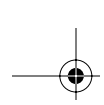
Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. . . . The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:8-9, 15-17 NIV).



The loving prohibition. This is the story of how Adam and Eve, and therefore every one of us, became separated from God. God placed the man and woman in a garden prepared for them. In the center of the garden were two trees: the tree of life, from which the man and woman were allowed to eat, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the fruit of which was forbidden to the man and woman. The inspired author is telling us that at the center of the full life God intends humans to enjoy is a *provision* as well as a *prohibition*. The provision—the tree of life—allows us to share in God's eternal fellowship. But God prohibits taking for ourselves what belongs to God, namely, the knowledge of good and evil.

The prohibition is as much an act of God's love as the provision is, for God knows we can only enjoy the provision when we honor the prohibition. God knows we can only live fully as human beings when we honor his holiness, which means his distinctness from us, his "otherness."¹ And the primary way we honor the difference between us and God is to acknowledge that we are not the ultimate moral judges. He is the one and





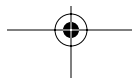
only “judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). Our role as God’s creatures is to receive, enjoy and reflect our Creator’s love and goodness as we exercise the authority over the earth he entrusted to us. But we can’t do this if we try to be wise like God, “knowing good and evil.”² To fully reflect God’s image in the way he intended, we must resist the serpent’s temptation to be “like God” in the way God has forbidden (Gen 3:5).

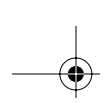
Unlike God, our knowledge and wisdom are finite. We simply are not equipped to make accurate and loving judgments about good and evil. To us, even in an unfallen condition, the complex world is mostly ambiguous. Our experience and perceptions of reality are incredibly narrow. Aside from God’s revelation of himself, we are incapable of drawing definitive conclusions about most things, especially the state of people’s hearts. But we can (1) trust what God tells us about himself, (2) experience fullness of love and life as we commune with God, (3) walk in humble obedience to him, and (4) exercise the authority he’s given to us.

When we go beyond this boundary and try to know what God alone can know, when we try to be “wise” like God, it destroys us. In trying to seize what properly belongs only to God, we lose what properly belongs to us. We forfeit our God-given authority on earth, giving it to Satan (see Lk 4:5-7). Instead of being ruled by divine love, we become oppressed by diabolic power. The “accuser” (Rev 12:10) turns us into accusers rather than lovers.

This is why the Lord warned the man and woman, “in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). The warning is repeated throughout the New Testament: we are emphatically told to “live in love” and not judge others (e.g., Mt 7:1-5; Rom 2:1-5; 14:1-23; Eph 5:2; Jas 4:11-12). God wants our life to be one of receiving and giving unsurpassable love. But this requires that we refrain from judgment.³

Unlike God, we are incapable of loving and judging at the same time. God therefore placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden as a loving warning. It is the prohibition around which our life with God revolves. It is his way of saying, “Be content with





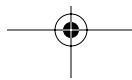
being my creations. Don't try to be me." The blessed life God wants for us is centered on our honoring this prohibition, honoring God as holy Creator, honoring the uniqueness of his wisdom and his role as Judge, and thus honoring the limited but wonderful domain of responsibility that is ours.

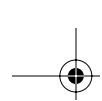
The lie at the foundation. In the Genesis story the crafty serpent twisted God's intention. He made it look as if God were less than loving in forbidding humans to eat from the tree. The serpent made it look like God was threatened by the forbidden tree.

Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?' . . .
[T]he serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen 3:1, 4-5)

The serpent accused God of being untrustworthy and Eve of being naive. The serpent suggested that God lied to Adam and Eve when he said they would die from the fruit of the forbidden tree. The accuser said the real reason God didn't want them to eat of the tree was that God was afraid of competition—Adam and Eve were being duped by this self-serving deity. God was protecting his exalted position by keeping the competition in the dark. The sweet life Adam and Eve had thus far enjoyed, trusting God to meet their needs and fellowshiping with him, was actually a trick. Their innocence, according to the serpent, was actually part of a devious plan by which God kept humans from becoming all they could be. They could be, if only they'd take matters into their own hands, wise like God.

This is the foundation of all sin: the lie that God is untrustworthy, the lie that God is not altogether loving and that he doesn't have our best interests in mind. Adam and Eve came under the grip of this deceptive picture of God. At that moment they stopped trusting God as their source of life. Consequently, they saw themselves as deficient. They were no longer OK simply trusting and obeying their Creator.





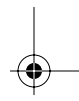
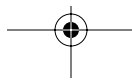
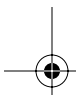
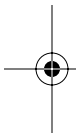
Eve subsequently bought the lie that in order to fulfill her life she needed to cross the boundary God had set up. Looking at the forbidden fruit with this lie-induced sense of emptiness, Eve no longer heeded God's loving warning to avoid death. She saw the fruit as "good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom," and she ate from the tree (Gen 3:6 NIV).

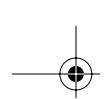
A faulty picture of God led to an ungodly evaluation that in turn brought about a rebellious action. The lie about God created the illusion that Eve could fill her emptiness by disobeying God. The lie created an emptiness as well as the futile and rebellious means of filling it. A false concept of God, and therefore of herself, gave birth to sinful behavior, which in turn brought about spiritual and physical death (see Jas 1:14-16).

This is not merely an account of what happened a long time ago. It's our own story. Under the bondage of the serpent's lie, we try to achieve through our own efforts what God wants to freely give us. We have a God-shaped vacuum in our hearts that only God can fill. But we try to fill that vacuum through our illegitimately seized knowledge of good and evil. Instead of innocently trusting God to meet our innermost needs, we trust our own assessment of things and our own ability to get the things we deem "good." We live by *our* knowledge of good and evil rather than by trusting our loving God.

The "good" we pursue may be respect, security, religion, ethical superiority, the rightness of our opinions, pleasure and so on. And the "evil" we avoid is anything that challenges the "goods" that have become our source of life. We end up desperately trying to attain a full life from a center of emptiness rather than from the center of abundance, which comes freely from our loving God.

This is what the Bible calls life in the "flesh," or life in "Adam" (see Rom 5:14; 8:8-9; 1 Cor 15:22). It is life separated from innocent communion with God, life lived in judgment rather than love. And its foundation is mistrust of God's character, which issues from a deceptive picture of God. To the extent that the God we envision is less than all-





loving, gracious, kind and altogether on our side, we can't trust him with our whole being. To the extent we believe this lie, we block the flow of God's life and love into our innermost being and spend our time trying to fill the vacuum with what we can do and get.

THE TRUTH OF THE WORD

Just as the foundation of all that separates us from God is a false picture of God, so too the foundation of all that restores our innocent communion with God is a true picture of God. So everything hangs on the question, Where do we find the true picture of God? The answer that the Bible unequivocally and emphatically gives is Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the truth that dispels the serpent's lie. The root of the word *truth* in Greek means "not covered." The serpent covered the true God from our minds and hearts, but Jesus removes this covering and reveals to us the real God. He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). Similarly, the Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of truth" because he reveals Christ to all who open their hearts to him. The Spirit manifests the One who "uncovers" the Father (Jn 16:13-14, cf. 2 Cor 3:16-18).

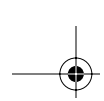
To see how Jesus "uncovers" the truth about God and our life, I will examine two New Testament motifs that reveal Jesus as God's self-revelation. The first concentrates on Jesus as the Word of God, the second on Jesus as the image of God.

Jesus is the Word of God. John 1 is a powerful testimony to the centrality of Christ for our picture of God. John opens his Gospel by saying:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (Jn 1:1-4 NIV)

Among other things, the concept behind *Word* refers to God's thinking and his self-expression.⁴ When God thinks, John is saying, *it is Jesus.*





And when God expresses himself, *it is Jesus*. Notice the singularity of John's claim. Jesus is not one Word among others, as though God had more than one mind and more than one mouth. Rather, *wherever* and *whenever* God thinks and expresses himself, it is Jesus Christ.

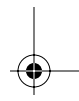
Moreover, it has been this way throughout eternity. John emphasizes the fact that the Word is not created. He was "in the beginning with God" and is himself *God*. He has been fellowshiping with the Father from all eternity (Jn 17:5, 24). This means that in knowing Jesus, we are not knowing someone "one step removed" from God. In knowing Jesus we are knowing *God himself*, God in his eternal essence. In seeing Jesus, we are seeing the very heart of God.

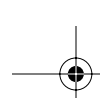
In fact, far from being created, the Word is actually the Creator. John tells us that everything was made by the Word, through the Word and for the Word (Jn 1:1-3). Creation exists, in other words, as an expression of God and for the purpose of people knowing God. Creation's purpose is found in Jesus Christ.

John also says that the Word is the life and the light of all people. God wants people to know him and share in his life (Jn 17:3). Whenever and wherever people experience true life and true light, it is Jesus Christ, whether they know it or not (Jn 1:4, 9). Whereas the enemy covered up the true God in a veil of deceptive darkness that brought death, Jesus turns the light on so we can see who God really is. In doing this, Jesus gives life. Indeed, he came to the world that we might once again have the abundant life God always intended us to enjoy (Jn 10:10). He desires all people to share in the eternal love he has with the Father and Spirit (Jn 17:20-26).

God made visible. The glorious significance of seeing Jesus as the Word of God is fleshed out by John:

And 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. . . . 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. (Jn 1:14, 18)





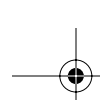
Picking up a theme that runs throughout the Bible, John tells us that no one has ever seen God's eternal, transcendent nature, for God is Spirit (Jn 4:24). Yet Jesus, who is himself "God the only Son," forever existing in perfect communion with the Father, has made God known. In becoming flesh the invisible God made himself visible. In Christ we *see* the glory of God (see 2 Cor 3:18—4:6; 1 Jn 1:1-3). In Christ the previously concealed God has been unambiguously revealed. In Christ the serpent's lie is dispelled.

The point is powerfully expressed later on in John's Gospel. In chapter fourteen we find Jesus telling his disciples, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him *and have seen him*" (Jn 14:7, italics added). To know Jesus is to know the Father, and to see Jesus is to see the Father. It's that simple. Philip did not quite get the point, however, so he asked Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (Jn 14:8). Jesus responded to him by reiterating his teaching even more emphatically. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (Jn 14:9).

This passage answers the question, where do we get our picture of God? And the emphatic answer it gives is, *in Jesus Christ*. As the eternal essence of God expressed in human form, Jesus is the visible representation of the Father. Everything we need to know about God is disclosed in him. In knowing Jesus there is nowhere else and no one else we need to look to in order to learn what God is like. If we are thinking biblically and therefore looking to Jesus (Heb 12:2, see also Col 3:1-4), we never need to ask, "Show us the Father."

The center of Scripture. The wholeness and vibrancy of our relationship with God depends on letting God define himself for us in Christ; we should not try to define God outside of or along side of Jesus Christ. Christ is our center, and everything in life must be viewed in relation to him. Our reading of Scripture must be carried out without looking even for a moment to the right or left of Jesus Christ. The Word incarnate is





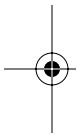
the fulfillment and complete expression of God's revelation in Scripture.

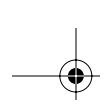
Jesus himself chastised many religious people of his day who did not accept him as the full disclosure of God and thus the centerpiece of Scripture. "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life," he said. But "it is they that testify on my behalf" (Jn 5:39). Hence Jesus rebuked them because they refused to come to him for life (Jn 5:40). The purpose of Scripture, Jesus was teaching, is to bring people to him. The words of Scripture don't have eternal life in and of themselves. They are vehicles to bring people to eternal life only insofar as they point people to the One who is eternal life. Indeed, Jesus went on to tell these people that they did not truly believe in Scripture unless they believed in him. "If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (Jn 5:46).

A similar point is made by the author of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:1-3)

All previous revelations mediated through words were merely anticipations of the revelation of God mediated through his own Son. The revelation of God in his Son is the pinnacle of God's revelation throughout history. He surpasses all previous revelations in that he alone is the perfect reflection of God's glory and exact imprint of God's very being. He is the one true God directly revealed as God's one true Word. As in the Gospel of John, Hebrews connects the unsurpassable revelatory nature of the Son to the fact that he is the Creator and Sustainer of the world as well as the One for whom the creation exists. He is the source of all things and "heir of all things." All of creation finds its ultimate explanation and fulfillment in Jesus.



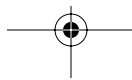


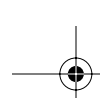
Hence, we must never think of the revelation of God in Christ as merely *part* of God's total revelation. Rather, everything before Christ must be read in the light of Christ. All previous revelations are authoritative for the Christian insofar as they anticipate and point to God's definitive revelation in Christ.

In contrast to all previous revelations, Jesus is the full revelation of God's wisdom, a wisdom that had been hidden throughout the ages (1 Cor 1:24; 2:7; Eph 3:9-11; Col 2:3). Moreover, in sharp contrast to all previous revelations, in Christ the "whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9; see also Col 1:19). All that makes God *God*—the whole *fullness* of his deity—took on bodily form in Christ. All previous revelations of God were partial, but in Christ God is revealed fully. All previous revelations were mediated through writing, but in Christ God is revealed *in bodily form*. Therefore, to see God's Son is to see God himself perfectly reflected, exactly imprinted and fully disclosed.

Transformed by the truth. Just as the lie about God is the foundation for all sin, so too the truth about God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is the foundation for all wholeness. Only the revelation of God in Christ completely dispels all forms of the lie we have been deceived into believing. When our picture of God is built on any foundation other than Jesus Christ—whether a foundation of experience, philosophy or Scripture interpreted apart from Christ—we will be vulnerable to believing a lie about God. We will be eating from our own knowledge of good and evil and constructing a false picture of God on the basis of our own fallible judgments. We will embrace a god that is consistent with our jaded presuppositions and fallible expectations, which keep us in bondage to the serpent's lie. Our understanding of God, ourselves, suffering and every other aspect of creation will be to some extent corrupted.

If we are to know the true God and not some subdivine figment of our imagination, all of our thinking about God must be centered on the One who is *the way, the truth, the life, the light* and *the Word* of God (see Jn 14:6).





THE TRUTH OF THE IMAGE

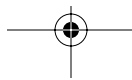
The image of God. Scripture highlights the centrality of the revelation of God in Christ by calling Jesus “the image of God.” The passage that most fully develops this theme is found in Colossians. Here Paul writes:

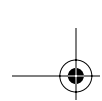
[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-20 NIV)

There are three points worth noting about this passage.

- *Transformed by God’s icon.* First, as we saw in John and in Hebrews, Paul identifies Jesus as the One in whom the otherwise invisible God is seen. The word *icon* comes from the Greek word for “image” (*eikōn*). Jesus is literally God’s icon. He is the One in whom God is seen, known and worshiped. It’s idolatrous for humans to make and worship icons of God (see Lev 19:4; 26:1), but it’s certainly not idolatrous for us to worship the One whom God himself presents as his icon. Indeed, we only know and worship God fully when we know and worship God’s icon (1 Jn 2:23; 5:20). Idolatry takes place when we *don’t* allow God to define himself for us in Christ but rather embrace a picture of God on the basis of our life experiences, philosophical speculations or non-Christ-centered interpretations of Scripture.

According to Paul all spiritual transformation is the result of the Spirit removing the veil from our minds and allowing us to see the glory of



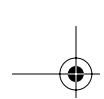


God uncovered in the One who is his image, Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul makes his case by building on the account in Exodus 34:33-35, where Moses had to veil the brightness of God's glory on his face after he received the Ten Commandments. Paul maintains that, in a sense, the glory of God is still veiled from unbelieving Jews, for "their minds were hardened" and "only in Christ is [the veil] set aside" (2 Cor 3:14). "To this very day," he continues, "whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds," for they cannot see that all Scripture points to Jesus (2 Cor 3:15). This recalls Jesus' teaching that the religious leaders of his day blindly searched the Scriptures for eternal life (Jn 5:39-46).

Paul is in agreement with Jesus, saying, "when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (2 Cor 3:16). Christ alone uncovers the true God for us. All who know God through Christ may "with unveiled faces" see "the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror." And as we behold this glory we are "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). In other words, when our unveiled minds behold the radiant beauty of the true God in Jesus Christ, we are transformed into his beauty. As we receive the love of God in Christ, we are transformed into his love. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we gradually become like Jesus. Our transformation is dependent on the picture of God we embrace in our mind and heart. And the picture God gives us is Jesus. The death-producing effects of the serpent's lie are reversed as we unwaveringly fix our sight on the One who is the truth.

Paul concludes his reflections by noting that the truth of the gospel is still "veiled to those who are perishing," for "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:3-4). The serpent's deception controls their life. To believers, however, "the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' . . . has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Believers have received a light that the veiled minds of nonbelievers cannot receive. Consequently, believers are en-





abled to trust God, who is as glorious as the One who is his true image. They are no longer in bondage to the lie of the serpent, for they see who God truly is: Jesus Christ. He is a God who loves them to the point of becoming human and dying a hellish, godforsaken death for them on the cross of Calvary.

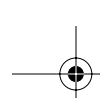
- *Summing up creation.* Second, Jesus' role as the image of God is connected to his role in creation. Paul's thinking on this point is in line with what we have already found in John and Hebrews.

Paul says that Christ is "the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15 NIV). Scholars almost unanimously concede that the point here is not chronological—as though Christ were literally born first. Instead, Paul is referring to Christ as "primogenitor": the firstborn heir to all creation. Paul explains that "all things were created *by* him and *for* him" and he "is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Christ is the source, sustainer and goal of all creation.

Jesus embodies and sums up the purpose of creation. Through the One in whom the invisible God is seen, the purposes of God are clearly seen. Hence, in Christ we see the ultimate truth of who *God* is, who *we* are and what the *world* is to be. More specifically, in Christ we see that God defines himself as One who is for us, to the point of dying for us on the cross. We see that we are both judged in our sin and reconciled to God by his mercy. The purpose of creation is for God to be God for us, and for us to be a people for God. The One in whom all this takes place and thus the One who reveals all this is Jesus Christ.

- *The image and redemption.* This leads to the third observation about Paul's concept of Christ as God's image. Paul not only connects Christ's role as God's image to creation, he also connects it to redemption. The one by whom and for whom the creation exists is the very same one who died and rose again to reconcile the world to God. In both roles Christ functions as God's image. Indeed, it is clear that for Paul the two roles are simply different aspects of the same thing. For in redeeming a people





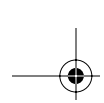
for himself Christ achieves and manifests the purpose of creation.

Paul says, “in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20). Whereas certain false teachers of his day were depicting Christ as one aspect of the display of God’s fullness, Paul insists, as we have already seen, that “the whole fullness of deity” dwells in Christ (Col 2:9). No aspect of God’s fullness was withheld from the incarnation. All we can and need to know about God is found in Christ, for God fully dwells in and is revealed in Christ. And the central purpose of this complete indwelling was to “reconcile to himself all things”: to reverse the separation of the Fall and to consummate the purpose of creation by dying on the cross.

Paul also says that the one who is the image of the invisible God is also “the head of the body, the church” and “the beginning and the first-born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Col 1:18 NIV) In dying and rising again Christ becomes the head, the source, of all who will say “yes” to God’s grace, and thus all who will participate in his resurrected life. This is the church, the body of those who are God’s redeemed people and who thus manifest God’s purpose for creation. The church manifests the truth that God is at work in Christ to reconcile the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). We witness to the truth that God’s goal is to “gather up all things in him” and “put all things under his feet” so that he might be “the head over all things for the church” (Eph 1:10, 22). In doing so, we proclaim the truth of who God is, who people truly are and what the purpose of the world is.

The centrality of Christ’s death. I want to emphasize that the central way Christ functions as the perfect image and exact imprint of God is by dying on the cross. To be sure, Christ’s entire life manifests the true God. But Christ came primarily to die (Mt 20:28). It was his death that defeated the devil and freed us from his bondage (1 Jn 3:8, see also Eph 1:20-21; Col 2:13-16). It was his death that atoned for our sin and





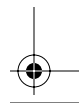
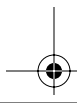
reconciled us to God (Rom 3:25; 1 Jn 2:2). It was his death that manifested the wisdom of God (Eph 3:9-11; see also 1 Cor 2:7-8). It was his death that consummated God's purpose in creation. Therefore, it was Christ's death that most decisively reveals who God truly is.

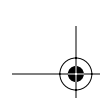
The cross is the absolute center of God's revelation to humanity and his purpose for creation. It is the paradox around which the world revolves. The cross is the mystery that explains, accomplishes and redeems everything. The fullness of God is most perfectly revealed in his becoming the Godforsaken man dying on a cursed tree (Gal 3:13). God's holiness is most perfectly displayed in his becoming sin for our sake (2 Cor 5:21). God's righteousness is most perfectly revealed when he himself becomes a judged criminal (Is 53:5). God's power is most perfectly displayed in his allowing himself to be crucified at the hands of sinners (Acts 2:23). God's glory is most perfectly revealed in the utter shame of the crucified Messiah (Is 53:3; Heb 12:2). God's beauty is most perfectly revealed in the horror of his executed Son.

The cross is the central way Christ images God. Christ was not an innocent third party who was punished against his will to appease the Father's wrath. Christ is himself God, and he voluntarily took our sin and its just punishment upon himself. Hence his sacrifice does not appease God's wrath; *it reveals God's love*. Even in—especially in—his agonizing death on the cross, Jesus is the exact imprint and perfect reflection of God. In the crucified Christ the truth about God, about us and about the world is most perfectly revealed. For the cross is where reconciliation between God and the world is accomplished.

THE TRUTH OF GOD'S LOVE

Projecting onto God. This breathtaking revelation is opposed to every version of the serpent's lie about what God is like. Under the impact of the primordial deception, the "natural mind" does not expect the omnipotent Creator to look like *this*. Our (fallen) tendency, operating out of our illegitimately seized knowledge of good and evil, is to project onto





God every “good” we think God *ought* to have. For example, in classical Western philosophical tradition, emotional vulnerability is a weakness, so we have projected onto God the attribute of “impassability” (above suffering). All variability is thought to be an imperfection, so God must be “immutable” (above any sort of change). Lack of control is also an imperfection, so God meticulously controls everything.

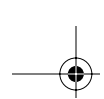
But we get a vastly different picture of God when we simply allow God to define himself in Christ! In Christ we see God’s greatness revealed in his suffering: God suffers out of his passionate love for humanity. In Christ we see God’s steadfast loving character revealed in his changeability: the Word *became* flesh (Jn 1:14), the holy One *became* sin (2 Cor 5:21), the One who eternally existed in perfect union with the Father *became* one cursed by the Father (Gal 3:13). And in Christ we see God’s omnipotence revealed in his weakness: God achieves his sovereign purpose for creation by dying on a cross at the hands of wicked people.

God is unsurpassable love. The foundational difference between the true image of God and every version of the serpent’s lie is that Jesus Christ first and foremost reveals God as unsurpassable love: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, italics added).⁵ As the triune Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is perfect love throughout eternity. In the person of Jesus Christ, God displays this perfect triune love by inviting us into his own eternal fellowship. No image of God ever devised under the power of the primordial lie has come close to matching the outrageous beauty of the true picture of God we are given in Jesus Christ.

The most fundamental distinguishing characteristic of every false picture of God is that it qualifies and compromises the truth about God’s love. The most fundamental distinguishing characteristic of the true God is that the love he is and the love he gives is *unsurpassable*. A greater love simply cannot be conceived.

The love that God eternally is, is manifested in the love that God gives. And the love God gives is displayed most perfectly on the cross. “We know love by this,” John tells us, “that [Jesus] laid down his life for





us.” (1 Jn 3:16). “God so loved the world,” he says elsewhere, “that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). In the words of Paul, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). *This is what true love looks like. For this is what God looks like.*

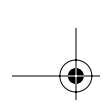
When he prays to his Father, Jesus connects the love that God is and the love that God gives with his purpose for creating the world:

I ask not only on behalf of these [the disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be *in us*, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that *they may be one, as we are one*, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have *loved them even as you have loved me*. . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that *the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them*. (Jn 17:20-23, 26, italics added).

God’s goal for creation, we see, is for the perfect, eternal love of the Father and Son to be replicated to people and among people. The same eternal love the Father has for the Son is given to all who will receive it. The “glory” that is eternally shared by the persons of the Trinity is given to all who will say yes to it. The unsurpassable love of the Trinity embraces all who will be embraced by it. And in embracing people, this eternal, unsurpassable love is replicated among people.

The ultimate goal of creation, in other words, is for people to receive, replicate and offer back to God the perfect love that God eternally is. We are to be mirrors of his eternal, triune love. We are to become one in love, *just as* the Father and Son are one. Indeed, we are to become one in love by *participating in* the perfect loving oneness of the Father and Son. We are to become “completely one” as we live in the loving oneness





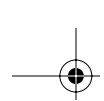
of the triune God. We participate in the eternal, triune fellowship and thereby glorify the triune fellowship.

This invitation is not extended to us because we deserve it. To the contrary, left to our own fallen state we are utterly opposed to fellowship with God. In our fallen state we are under God's wrathful condemnation, dead in our sin (Eph 2:1-5). By God's mercy and transforming grace alone we are able to receive God's love and offer this love back to God and others. Only by grace are we enabled to participate in the loving fellowship that God eternally is. This invitation extended to us on the cross and activated through the inner working of the Holy Spirit reveals the unexcelled perfection of God's love. That God goes to this unthinkable extreme to allow undeserving sinners to join in his triune fellowship manifests the unsurpassable love that God is. Again, a greater love simply cannot be imagined.

The crucifixion reveals God's attributes. By dying on the cross Christ displayed God's love and did all that was necessary for us to participate in God's love. He dispelled the serpent's lie and unveiled the truth of who God truly is: unsurpassable love. He did this while defeating Satan, freeing us from Satan's bondage, atoning for our sins and thus opening up the door for us to participate in the very love he was revealing.

Now we more fully understand how the fullness of God was perfectly revealed through a godforsaken man dying on a cursed tree. For the fullness of God is most fundamentally the fullness of his eternal, triune love. Now we understand how God's holiness was perfectly displayed in his becoming sin for our sake (2 Cor 5:21). For the essence of God's holiness is his eternal triune love. Now we understand how God's righteousness was perfectly revealed in his becoming a judged criminal on our behalf. For God's righteousness is simply the justice of his unsurpassable love. Now we understand how God's power was most perfectly displayed in his allowing himself to be crucified at the hands of sinners. For God's power is simply the power of his love. Now we understand how God's glory was most perfectly revealed in the utter shame of the crucified





Messiah. For God's glory is most fundamentally the radiance of his incomprehensible love. And we now understand how God's beauty is most perfectly revealed in the horror of his executed Son. For God's beauty is nothing other than the magnificence of his love put on display.

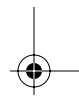
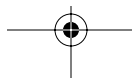
CONCLUSION

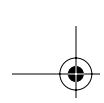
Jesus is the perfect expression of God's thought, character and will. He is God's self-definition to us. We have seen that in Christ, God defines and expresses himself as a God of outrageous love. He is for us, not against us. God also defines humans as undeserving people with whom he is nevertheless in love. *This* is the Word and image of the true God.

Our understanding of God, ourselves and the world cannot be derived from our experience, our independent philosophizing or even our interpretation of the Bible apart from Christ. If we take our cue about these things from any source other than Christ, we will stay under the bondage of the serpent's lie—we will misconstrue God, ourselves and the world. Our picture of God must be centered unequivocally and unwaveringly on Jesus Christ. But this is not always easy to do.

To finite beings like ourselves, the world is ambiguous in the best of conditions. When the child we miraculously conceived dies in childbirth, when the cancer we thought had been cured returns, when terrorists kill thousands in a collapsed skyscraper, when we lose all our possessions in a fire, when we fall once again into our destructive addiction or even when we read about God destroying entire people-groups in the Old Testament, it's easy to let our eyes wander off of Jesus Christ and to begin once again to concoct a god of our own imagining. In the war zone we presently live in, a world that is still under the influence of Satan, "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4), things often appear as a raging sea of ambiguity. We need something—Someone—we can anchor ourselves to. The anchor God gives us is Jesus Christ. This alone is what we can trust: God is decisively revealed in Jesus Christ.

Precisely in times like these we must remain "rooted and grounded in





love” (Eph 3:17) by allowing Christ to “dwell in [our] hearts through faith.” In times like these we must ask God to give us “the power to comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). It is precisely in times like these that we must fix our eyes on “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (Heb 12:2).

Amidst the sea of ambiguity we swim in, we must not rely on our own “knowledge of good and evil” to figure out what God is like and what he is up to. We must rather “take every thought captive to obey Christ” as we “with unveiled faces [see] . . . the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 10:5; 3:18; 4:6). He and he alone is the one true Word and image of God.

