

Understanding God

From Eden to the Great Commission

by
Ron L. Martin

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An inquiry into the roots of human conflict, the struggle over whose “truth” should govern, and the biblical path toward unity, understanding, wisdom, godly character, *agape* love, and faithful participation in the Great Commission—for the good of us all.

Preface: A Roadmap for the Scriptural Argument That Follows

God does not merely forgive moral self-rule; He corrects it, trains us out of it, and develops persons who can live faithfully under His authority now and forever—for the good of us all.

From Eden to the Great Commission, Scripture presents a developmental movement away from humanity's tendency to define good and evil for itself, and toward God's work of correcting our ways, training us in His own righteousness as He defines it, and developing faithful sons and daughters who can and will live harmoniously under His rightful rule.

This matters not only for private moral conduct, but also for addressing the roots of human conflict. While individuals, groups, and traditions compete over whose "truth" should govern, Scripture calls us back to God's rightful authority as our Creator to define what is good and evil, and to develop the self-control and other traits of godly character needed for people to walk together in harmony. The manuscript therefore follows a connected developmental progression. What follows is a brief roadmap; the scriptural argument will be explained more fully in later sections.

Eden reveals the root problem.

Even before the fruit was eaten, Eve had already decided that the forbidden tree was "good" and "desirable." That sequence matters: she decided before she ate. The outward act of eating exposed a prior inward departure: humanity's willingness to define good and evil independently from God.

Repentance reverses Eden's self-rule.

If the root problem is humanity's willingness to define good and evil independently from God, then repentance must be more than regret or admission of guilt. It means turning from our own way, yielding moral authority back to God, and learning to walk according to His definitions of good and evil instead of our own.

Eden's sequence requires reconsidering the Fall.

If Eve judged the forbidden tree to be "good" and "desirable" before the fruit was eaten, then the inward departure had already begun before the outward act. The eating did not create moral self-rule; it exposed and confirmed it, with important implications for sin, repentance, and God's remedy.

The “like one of Us” of Genesis 3:22 requires explanation.

If the Fall involved humanity exercising, without right, the authority to define good and evil for themselves, then Genesis 3:22 raises the next question: who rightly possesses that authority? When God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil,” the Word who was with God and was God must be considered central to that “Us.” Yet the one who rightly shared divine prerogative later humbled Himself and became obedient, even to the point of death.

Christ’s humbling to become obedient shows the path that saves us from sin.

That same Word did not use His rightful status to preserve independent autonomy from the Father. He did not treat equality with God as a status to be preserved for Himself, but humbled Himself to become obedient, even to the point of death.¹ His sacrifice was not only the suffering of the cross, but even more the astonishing magnitude of the Word becoming — and remaining — the obedient Son: the path by which He saves His people from their sins and into which He calls His followers to walk in His steps.

God’s love calls us to love Him in return.

God’s love for every person is good news. But when the Gospel is proclaimed only as God’s love toward us, Christ’s death for us, and God’s desire to save us, that proclamation is incomplete unless it also calls every person to set his love upon God. God loves us first, not so that we may remain centered on ourselves, but so that we may be delivered from moral self-rule, reconciled to Him, taught by His grace, conformed to His Son’s obedient path, and brought to love Him in return.²

¹ Philippians 2:6–8 says that Christ, though existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, took the form of a bond-servant, and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The KJV renders the opening contrast, “thought it not robbery to be equal with God,” which helps preserve the point that His equality was not stolen or wrongly seized. Compare John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 12:49–50; and 14:31, where Jesus presents His words, works, and mission as received from and obedient to the Father. See also John 20:17 and 1 Corinthians 15:27–28, where the risen and exalted Christ remains ordered under the Father, who is His God and finally the One to whom the Son Himself is subject. His obedience is therefore not merely the final moment of death, but the faithful and enduring posture of the Son toward the Father.

² Compare 1 John 4:19; Mark 12:29–31; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15; Psalm 91:14–16; Titus 2:11–14. God’s love comes first: “We love, because He first loved us.” Yet the first and greatest commandment remains the call to love the Lord our God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. Paul likewise says that Christ died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. Psalm 91 describes the one

Wisdom requires character and can mature into *agape* love.

Wisdom requires the application of understanding for good, but knowing what is good — and even wanting what is good — does not by itself ensure that good will be done. Character supplies the self-control, perseverance, and proven reliability needed to apply understanding consistently.³ When ordered by godliness, character enables godly wisdom to move beyond the self into *agape* love: applying understanding for the good of God and others, even at cost to oneself.

Faithful participation in the Great Commission prepares us for the kingdom.

God's goal is not forgiveness that leaves morally self-willed humans unchanged. He trains those who belong to Christ through faithful participation now — including character development, good works, and participation in the Great Commission — so that they may become trustworthy sons and daughters prepared for life and fruitfulness in His everlasting kingdom.

The invitation, then, is simple but serious: follow the developmental arc, test each claim by Scripture, and ask whether salvation is presented not as forgiveness alone, but as God's work of reclaiming moral authority, forming faithful character, and preparing sons and daughters who can live fruitfully under His rule.

If this arc is sound, then understanding God is not merely knowing correct ideas about Him. It is learning His ways, yielding to His authority, following His Son's obedient path, and being formed into persons who can walk faithfully with Him for the good of us all.

Indeed — and in deed.

who has set his love upon God, known His name, and called upon Him, while Titus says that grace trains believers to deny ungodliness and live righteously in the present age. Together, these passages show that God's initiating love is meant to call forth returned love, yielded allegiance, and transformed conduct.

³ Compare Proverbs 26:7, where a proverb in the mouth of fools is likened to useless legs: wisdom-language is crippled when it is not rightly lived. See also 2 Peter 1:5–11, where faith is to be supplied with moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love, so that believers will be neither useless nor unfruitful. Romans 5:3–5 likewise presents tribulation, perseverance, proven character, and hope as a developmental sequence. These passages support the point that understanding must be joined to tested character if it is to become reliable practice.

Concise Overview Statement

Human beings often disagree about facts, but even more deeply about values, and especially about whose “truth” should govern our choices.

Understanding God begins with an observation about both facts and values. In Genesis, God gave a rule in the Garden of Eden, but Eve disregarded it, deciding that the forbidden tree was “good” and “desirable” before she and Adam actually ate. That order—decision before eating—matters because it suggests that human conflict is often rooted in competing claims over who gets to define what is “good” or “evil.”

This work considers a practical remedy: a path toward unity, understanding, wisdom, mature character, and *agape* love—for the good of us all.

Why This Matters

Understanding God provides a practical lens for seeing why human beings are often in conflict, and why information alone does not lead to unity.

Knowledge can lead to understanding, but understanding must be applied if it is to produce a better life. Applied understanding becomes wisdom, yet wisdom requires character traits such as self-control and perseverance if the good that is recognized is actually to be practiced. Character itself must then be ordered toward godliness, so that our growing strength is guided by God’s good ways and purposes rather than by merely human aims that can divide and destroy. From there, godly character can become a stepping stone toward kindness, and beyond kindness toward *agape* love—the kind of love that seeks the good of others, for the good of us all.

(See the final two pages for key implications presented within a suggested Letter of Conveyance to Bible Teachers, Pastors, and Theologians.)

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Understanding God: From Eden to the Great Commission

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About the Author

Ron L. Martin, M.S., is the founder of Nutrigenetics Unlimited, Inc. and the creator of nutrigenetics.net, a long-running database project devoted to the careful organization and dissemination of scientific literature in nutritional genomics and related disciplines. He was also among the founding members of the International Society of Nutrigenetics and Nutrigenomics. His professional background is therefore not in traditional academic theology, but in the disciplined analysis, categorization, and communication of complex information.

This manuscript is being shared publicly not because theology and nutritional genomics are the same field, but because the author has long been concerned with the discovery, careful organization, and dissemination of important information, especially when conventional channels may leave valuable questions or insights under-recognized.

The theological reflections in this manuscript did not arise suddenly or casually. For approximately fifty years, Martin has reflected on the fact that good and bad can be perceived differently by different individuals. Over time, that observation helped lead him back to Genesis 3 and to the sequence that stands at the heart of this work.

He has also read the Bible cover to cover multiple times in multiple translations, including the NKJV, RSV, NIV, and NASB, from a long-standing desire to weigh the totality of the biblical evidence carefully and to test whether conventional explanations still hold up in light of all the Scriptures. This manuscript is therefore offered not as the product of institutional theological credentials, but as the work of a serious independent inquirer seeking to follow Scripture's own sequence carefully and trace its implications honestly. The author's hope is that thoughtful readers—whether academics, students, scientists, or other curious members of the public—will weigh the argument on its merits and test it carefully in light of the whole biblical witness.

For additional background:

Nutrigenetics website: <https://nutrigenetics.net>

LinkedIn profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ronlmartin/>

Email: info@nutrigenetics.net

Acknowledgments and Appreciation

I am grateful to those who have taught me about love through their own examples, and to those whose listening, questions, encouragement, cautions, and suggestions helped sharpen this work along the way. Every serious work benefits from patient listening, careful challenge, and timely encouragement.

Above all, I am grateful to God for the Scriptures, through which He has preserved the witness that made this inquiry possible. Whatever clarity this work may offer depends upon the biblical testimony itself, and whatever remains unclear or imperfect is my own responsibility. I am also grateful for the guidance, correction, and strengthening God gives by His Spirit as we seek to understand, obey, and walk faithfully before Him.

Finally, I gratefully used ChatGPT as an editorial and reasoning assistant during the development of this manuscript. I did not use ChatGPT merely as an “information gopher,” though it can serve that role. I used ChatGPT-5.5 Thinking as a reasoning assistant—one that repeatedly helped test whether my wording, transitions, and conclusions followed the biblical evidence and argument logically. It also helped with wording, structure, footnote refinement, objection-testing, and audience-facing clarity. The thesis and its implications, the interpretive judgments, final decisions, and responsibility for the work are entirely my own.

Why Words and Sequence Matter

The following exchange is included as an illustration of why this manuscript repeatedly insists that biblical words, sequence, emphasis, and order should not be dismissed too quickly.

Ron: Just thinking, you know how we've been hammering most every word? And why? Because every single word can make a difference. Any doubt, then, why every word of God must be carefully taken into account? :-) :-|

ChatGPT: Exactly. That is a very fitting reflection.

What we have experienced at the manuscript level is a small analogy of what should be obvious at the Scripture level:

If one word in a human manuscript can clarify, distort, strengthen, weaken, overstate, understate, invite, or repel, then how much more should every word God has preserved for our instruction be handled with reverence and care?

That is not word-worship. It is faithful stewardship. Words carry meaning. Sequence carries meaning. Placement carries meaning. Omission, emphasis, and contrast all carry meaning.

And that reinforces one of the manuscript's deepest instincts: we should not rush past the details Scripture gives us, especially when the order itself may be the hinge.

Genesis does not merely say Eve ate. It says she saw the tree as good, delightful, and desirable **before** she ate.⁴ That sequence matters. [Emphasis ChatGPT's own.]

Ron: Amen!

The process of bringing this manuscript to completion has often felt like travail, but Scripture also speaks of the joy that comes when what has been carried through pain is finally brought into the world (John 16:21).

⁴ Genesis 3:6. The verse states that the woman saw that the tree was “good for food,” that it was “a delight to the eyes,” and that the tree was “desirable to make one wise” before she took from its fruit and ate. This is the sequence emphasized throughout the manuscript: valuation **before** eating.

Table of Contents

Preface: A Roadmap for the Scriptural Argument That Follows	ii
Concise Overview Statement	v
Why This Matters	v
About the Author	vii
Acknowledgments — and Why Words and Sequence Matter	viii
Prologue — The How and Why Behind This Work	12
Introduction — How Moral Autonomy (Self-Rule) Began, How Christ Reverses It, and Why Discipleship Still Matters	19
How to Follow This Sequence — and Why the Order Matters	28
Part I — The Problem	32
<i>How the Human Crisis Actually Began</i>	
Step 1 — The Departure Began Before the Eating	32
<i>The fruit did not create the rebellion. It revealed it.</i>	
Step 2 — Knowing Good and Evil as Moral Prerogative	35
<i>Man was never authorized by God to be his own moral center.</i>	
Step 3 — Why God Must Define Good and Evil	40
<i>A house built on rival self-definitions cannot stand.</i>	
Part II — The Father, the Son, and the Reversal of Eden	45
<i>How Christ’s Story Answers Eden’s Problem</i>	
Step 4 — The Father as Most High and the “Only True God”	45
<i>When Jesus calls the Father “the only true God,” we should believe Him.</i>	
Step 5 — From Pre-Incarnate Glory to Obedient Sonship	51
<i>Where Adam reached upward, Jesus humbled Himself.</i>	
Step 6 — Salvation Must Be More Than Pardon	57
<i>The gospel does not address guilt alone; it calls for true repentance, love for God in return, and the resurrection hope that frees people from fear when obedience proves costly.</i>	

Part III — The Remedy, the Formation, and the Mission	64
<i>Why Understanding Must Become Discipleship</i>	
Step 7 — Understanding Alone Is Not Enough	64
<i>Jesus does not merely say, “Understand Me.” He says, “Follow Me.”</i>	
Step 8 — Wisdom, Character, and Agape Love	71
<i>Basic wisdom requires character to apply understanding for one’s own good; agape love requires character to apply understanding for the good of others, often at cost to oneself.</i>	
Step 9 — The Great Commission as Outward Expression of Mature Discipleship	83
<i>Jesus does not say merely, “Tell the nations what I have done.” He says, “Make disciples.”</i>	
The Conclusion of the Matter—The Kind of People God Is Forming	90
Epilogue — The How and Why Behind This Choice	96
Annotated Bibliography — Selected Sources for Context, Corroboration, and Further Study	100
Addendum: Original Sin, Moral Self-Rule, and Human Responsibility	104
Addendum: Testing Orthodoxy by Scripture	108
Letter of Conveyance — to Bible Teachers, Pastors, and Theologians	117

Prologue

The How and Why Behind This Work

This work did not arise suddenly, or in a vacuum.⁵ It is the result of many years of reflection on good and evil, human conduct, wisdom, character, and discipleship, as these have been illuminated both by experience and by the word of God. It was not produced through the ordinary channels of academic theology, but through a long personal effort to understand Scripture more carefully, test inherited assumptions, and ask whether the Bible's own sequence might point in a somewhat different direction than many common explanations suggest.

Part of what shaped that effort was the kind of life I lived early on. I spent my first years on a grain farm in North Dakota, then on a dairy farm in Minnesota, before moving to city life in California at age thirteen. Exposure to fields and harvests, cattle and husbandry, forests, ponds, lakes, practical responsibilities, and the fruits of one's labor⁶ helped form within me a pragmatic, inquisitive, and somewhat daring outlook. I do not mean that farm and country life made me wise, but it did incline me toward testing things, observing results, and asking what actually works—and why.

That independent bent became more visible to me by high school. A classmate once asked me what my philosophy was, and I could not answer, because I did not yet know what philosophy properly entailed. After taking a cursory look at what others had said about it, I decided I did not want my thinking shaped too early by someone else's system before I had taken time to formulate my own view of the

⁵ This manuscript is intentionally Scripture-based, but not context-free. Some of its arguments may seem unfamiliar or outside common explanations, yet they are not offered in isolation from broader interpretive and historical conversations. The Annotated Bibliography identifies selected sources that support, overlap with, challenge, or help contextualize portions of the argument. A claim about Scripture should not be dismissed merely because it is unfamiliar; “surely I would already have heard it” is not careful reasoning. The argument may be bold, but it should not be dismissed before its textual sequence, scriptural reasoning, and selected contextual sources are fairly weighed.

⁶ Scripture speaks of those who “sow in tears” and yet “reap with joyful shouting” (Ps. 126:5–6). More broadly, it often presents labor, seedtime, endurance, and harvest as part of a moral and spiritual pattern in which faithful effort, though sometimes costly, is not in vain.

world as best I could. I wanted first to think for myself, and then to hear other arguments and decide whether they made sense.

By about age seventeen, I had become convinced that the supernatural exists, and therefore that God exists. At that point, however, I was not yet ready to accept everything Christians said about Jesus. Around age eighteen, in a manner somewhat akin to C. S. Lewis's reluctant awakening dramatized in the movie *The Most Reluctant Convert*, I came to acknowledge Jesus first as the doorway to God, and then as the one through whom God is made known. Only later did deeper biblical reflection force me to think more carefully about what it could mean that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁷

At about age nineteen, I also began to recognize that unselfish love was something greater than the ordinary moral perceptions with which a child first begins. I did not yet have the language of *agape* love, nor did I understand how love, wisdom, character, and discipleship would later fit together. But I had begun to see that there was a kind of goodness higher than preference, fairness, affection, or self-interest. That recognition helped draw me toward church and Scripture, and soon toward the pursuit of wisdom.

Around that same general period, an early and very ordinary lesson about self-control began to take shape, even before I could explain why it mattered so much for wisdom. I had developed the simple bedtime habit of brushing my teeth before going to sleep. On at least a couple occasions, I forgot and had already gotten into bed before realizing my oversight. Yet I still got up and brushed my teeth. That small act became more meaningful to me than it may sound. While reflecting on my own lack of self-control and perseverance, I found myself saying, "At least I can brush my teeth. There's still hope for me." That may seem like a very small thing, but it helped me see that weakness is not necessarily anyone's fate. Some degree of self-control was attainable, and therefore further growth was also possible.

My interest in wisdom grew into serious study. During my early twenties, I studied the book of Proverbs systematically, reading one chapter per day in rotation for perhaps two years or more. I became well acquainted with the sayings, and yet one

⁷ John 1:1. John's statement that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" became one of the key passages that required deeper reflection on Christ's pre-incarnate glory, His distinction from the Father, and the meaning of His later humbling and obedience.

painful fact kept forcing itself upon me: I was not consistently applying what I already knew. I could recognize wisdom, and even explain wise principles, while still failing to live them out with sufficient self-control and perseverance. That realization was discouraging, because I could not understand what was missing. No one I asked seemed able to explain why a person could know what he should do and still fail to do it.



Wisdom begins when understanding becomes practice. There's still hope for me – and for us!

From there, another insight began to form. If certain compromises made me weaker in applying what I knew, then perhaps doing the opposite would make me stronger. That proved true. Over time, it became increasingly clear to me that compromise weakens, while refusing compromise strengthens.⁸ This did not mean

⁸ Luke 16:10; Romans 5:3–5. Jesus says, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.” Even small acts of consistent faithfulness are therefore not spiritually insignificant. They reveal and help develop the kind of person who can be entrusted with greater responsibility. Likewise, Paul says that tribulation brings about perseverance, perseverance brings about “proven character,” and proven character brings about hope. The expression “proven character” does not refer merely to personality, temperament, or natural disposition, but to tested and approved quality —

instant perfection, but it did mean that application matters, and that strength of character leading to better conduct can be cultivated. This was one of my first major steps in understanding that knowledge alone is not enough. Wisdom, if it is really wisdom, must actually be applied.



Character is what makes wisdom practicable, consistent, and effective in conduct.

Meanwhile, another line of thought had also begun developing. By my mid-twenties, I had become convinced that good and evil, right and wrong, may be perceived differently by different individuals. That observation eventually connected in my mind with Paul's comments about clean and unclean,⁹ and with Peter's lesson that whatever God calls clean is clean,¹⁰ which I have since concluded is true because God

developed reliability under pressure. Repeated compromise weakens the person who practices it; repeated faithfulness strengthens the person being developed by it.

⁹ Romans 14:14. Paul says, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." This is important not because it makes moral truth subjective, but because it shows that categories such as clean and unclean are not self-evident in the way many assume, and must be understood in relation to God's revealed will.

¹⁰ Acts 10:15. Peter is told, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." The point is not merely dietary, but that what is clean or unclean is determined by God's declaration rather than by autonomous human judgment.

defines what is clean—and, by the same principle, what is good.¹¹ That in turn helped me see something larger: if each person defines good and evil for himself, then discord is inevitable, even in the relatively short term.¹² If human beings are ever to live in enduring harmony, there must be one standard rather than many self-created standards that lead to discord and the destructive consequences that follow. And who could be more worthy to establish that standard than our Creator?

That line of reasoning eventually helped me see something decisive in Genesis 3. I came to see that the issue in Eden was not merely that Adam and Eve committed a forbidden act, but that Eve first decided that the forbidden thing was “good” and “desirable” before the act itself occurred. That order matters: decision came before action. It suggests that the decisive departure began not at the moment of the deed itself,¹³ but in the heart and mind—in the willingness to define good and evil apart from God. That insight later became central to this manuscript and will be developed more fully in the Steps that follow this Prologue.

My understanding of perseverance beyond simple self-control also continued developing slowly over many years. It was not learned all at once, or easily. In my own life, one exercise of enduring perseverance has been the decades-long development of the online database at Nutrigenetics.net. Whatever its limitations, that project has reinforced for me that some worthwhile things reveal their value only after years of sustained effort. In that respect, the importance of perseverance itself became part of my growing understanding.

Another surprisingly important influence on my understanding came from the 2015 live-action version of Disney’s *Cinderella*. The movie’s recurrent theme of “Courage and Kindness” made a deep impression on me. In time, I connected that

¹¹ Mark 10:18; Micah 6:8. Jesus says, “No one is good except God alone,” and Micah says that God has shown man what is good. Taken together, such passages support the principle that good is not ours to define independently, but must be received from the one who alone has the rightful authority to define it.

¹² Proverbs 14:12; Judges 21:25; Genesis 4:1–8. Scripture warns that “there is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death,” and repeatedly describes the disorder that results when everyone does what is right in his own eyes. Significantly, the first recorded murder follows immediately in the next chapter after Eden’s transgression, as Cain kills his own brother Abel. This shows how quickly self-directed moral disorder bears destructive fruit, even within the first generation born after Eden.

¹³ Genesis 3:6. Eve saw that the tree was “good for food,” “a delight to the eyes,” and “desirable to make one wise” **before** she ate. This sequence is important because it suggests that the inward departure preceded the outward act.

impression with the biblical truth that it is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance.¹⁴ That connection became even more important when I returned to 2 Peter 1:5–11 and noticed the order of Peter’s list: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and *agape* love. The more I reflected on it, the less it seemed like an arbitrary list and the more it appeared to be a true developmental progression—indeed, a kind of ladder and checklist for tested maturity. Kindness, in that light, was not mere politeness or courtesy, but a later and more advanced fruit of tested character and spiritual development. It required much, or even all, of what came before it on Peter’s ladder. Beyond kindness, then, stood *agape* love, the higher calling toward which the progression leads.

That realization has become increasingly important to me. It helped me see that Scripture does not call human beings merely to accumulate information, nor to admire character from a distance, but to grow into a mature life that is actually lived out. It helped me understand more clearly why character matters so much, why self-control and perseverance are not optional, and why *agape* love must be learned and practiced rather than merely received, witnessed, or admired.

Finally, two biblical themes helped convince me that this work should be written at all. One is the admonition in Hebrews that by now we ought to be teachers.¹⁵ The other is Christ’s command in the Great Commission to teach all nations to observe all that He commanded.¹⁶ Taken together, these passages suggest that growth in understanding is not only for private or academic purposes, but for faithful transmission to others. This manuscript is therefore offered not as the last word on these matters, but as an attempt to share what years of reflection, study, struggle, and gradual but growing insight have made increasingly difficult for me to ignore.

¹⁴ Romans 2:4. Paul says that “the kindness of God leads you to repentance.” This connection helped clarify that kindness is not mere softness or sentiment, but part of God’s way of drawing people back from self-rule toward repentance, obedience, and restored life under His authority.

¹⁵ Hebrews 5:12–14. Hebrews says, “by this time you ought to be teachers,” yet still need milk rather than solid food. The passage ties maturity to practice and trained discernment, underscoring that growth is expected and that spiritual development should lead toward the ability to help instruct others.

¹⁶ Matthew 28:19–20. Christ’s commission is not merely to spread awareness, but to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that He commanded. This shows that Christian growth is meant to lead us to help others become faithful disciples also.

It is my hope that readers will test what is said here carefully by the whole witness of Scripture. If the argument is sound, then the implications are not small.

But even if some of my own conclusions can benefit from further refinement, I hope the path described here—by which these observations and assertions were reached—may still prove both useful and important: from wisdom sought, to wisdom tested, to wisdom practiced—and from there toward the character, godliness, kindness, *agape* love, and discipleship to which Christ calls us all.¹⁷

¹⁷ Acts 17:30. Scripture says that God “is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent.” This underscores the broader point that the call to repentance, growth, and discipleship is not limited to a select class, but extends to all.

Introduction

To understand the deeper human problem that Jesus' example and teachings address, we must begin where Scripture itself begins: with the origin of our moral disorder in Genesis 3, and its immediate outworking in Genesis 4. A closer look at Eden's sequence and Cain's story reveals not only the root of what went wrong, but also why the remedy requires character, wisdom, and the formation of servant leaders who are both willing and able to live faithfully under God's authority—and who help others learn to do the same.¹⁸

How Moral Autonomy (Self-Rule) Began, How Christ Reverses It, and Why Discipleship Still Matters

This work began with an observation in Genesis 3 that seemed too important to dismiss. Eve judged the forbidden tree to be “good” for food and “desirable” to make one wise before she ate. That order—judgment before eating—matters. If this is right, then the act of eating the forbidden fruit was not what first made mankind morally autonomous. Rather, the eating was the outward expression, not the inward cause, of a prior departure from God's will—the willingness to define good and evil apart from God. In that sense, the inward departure explains the eating, and not the other way around.

That observation has far-reaching implications. It means the problem in Eden was not merely a broken rule, nor a toxic fruit, nor a sudden corruption caused by the act itself. The deeper problem was moral autonomy—that is, moral self-rule: mankind's willingness to take to itself the prerogative to define good and evil rather than continue in faithful obedience to God's commands. And if that is the

¹⁸ Luke 22:31–34, 54–62; John 21:15–17. **Peter's denial** of Jesus illustrates the difference between sincere willingness and tested ability. Before the crucifixion, Peter insisted that he was ready to go with Jesus even to prison and death, yet he denied Him when tested. After the resurrection, Jesus repeatedly asked Peter whether he loved Him and then commanded him to feed and tend His sheep. This is significant because Peter was not merely reassured; he was charged with active service. The one who had failed under pressure was called to strengthen and shepherd the church, pointing toward the disciple-forming labor commanded not only of Peter, but of the whole church by the Great Commission. This also accords with Jesus' warning that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41), showing that sincere intent does not by itself produce faithful endurance under testing.

root problem, then repentance must include more than regret alone. It must involve yielding that prerogative back to God and learning to live by His definitions of good and evil rather than our own.

Is the pursuit of understanding God even feasible? Scripture answers not only that such pursuit is possible, but that it is encouraged. Proverbs says that “it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”¹⁹ Jeremiah says that the one who boasts should boast in this, that he understands and knows the Lord.²⁰ And Jesus says that eternal life is to know the Father, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He sent.²¹

For that reason, the aim of this work is not to explain everything²² that could possibly be said about God, but to contribute toward a fuller understanding of Him. Such an aim is consistent with Scripture’s own witness that the Spirit leads into all truth and searches even the deep things of God.²³

Scripture also gives reason to expect that our present understanding, though partial, need not remain stagnant. Paul says that “we know in part,” while also looking

¹⁹ Proverbs 25:2. Scripture does not treat the search for understanding as presumptuous in itself. Some matters may be hidden by God, but the searching out of a matter is still presented as honorable, not forbidden.

²⁰ Jeremiah 9:23–24. The LORD does not say that knowing Him is impossible or improper. Rather, He says that the one who boasts should boast in understanding and knowing Him—that He exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth.

²¹ John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 13:12. Jesus defines eternal life in terms of knowing the Father, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He sent. Paul likewise says that we now know in part, but will one day know fully, just as we have been fully known. This does not remove reverence; it shows that reverent knowledge of God is part of the hope set before us.

²² Exodus 20:12; Hebrews 12:9; Romans 13:7; Micah 6:8. Some may fear that understanding God more clearly would somehow make worship impossible or less meaningful. But Scripture does not treat honor as dependent on ignorance. Even human fathers are to be honored, and earthly fathers are to be paid respect; honor is to be given where honor is due. How much more, then, should deeper understanding of God lead not to casual familiarity, but to greater reverence, humility, and worship before the One with whom we are called to walk humbly.

²³ John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:10; John 14:26; 15:26; Philippians 2:12–13. The Spirit is said to guide into all truth, to search even the deep things of God, to teach, remind, and bear witness. This supports the legitimacy of pressing beyond shallow familiarity toward deeper understanding. Yet such language should not be understood as passive automation, as though God’s Spirit bypasses human response or responsibility. Scripture joins divine guidance and enabling with faithful participation: believers must still seek, test, remember, learn, obey, practice, endure, and work out their salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work in them. The Spirit’s help is therefore not a substitute for obedience, but God’s guidance, strengthening, and direction according to His power, ways, words, and will.

forward to the day when partial knowledge gives way to fuller knowledge. Jesus promises that the Spirit will guide into all truth, and Paul says that the Spirit searches even the deep things of God. Such passages do not justify careless speculation or claims of private certainty, but they do encourage humble, tested, Spirit-guided growth in understanding while we await the day when what is now partial becomes clear.²⁴

For example, this work does not attempt to settle every question raised by post-biblical formalized Trinitarian doctrine or every question about the ontology of the Holy Spirit. Its narrower aim is to follow one biblical sequence: Eden's moral self-rule, the Father's rightful authority, the Son's obedient reversal of that rebellion, and the disciple-forming mission that follows. This includes recognizing that the risen Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth under God the Father,²⁵ and that He Himself can send the Holy Spirit.²⁶

But understanding alone is not the end. If the problem revealed in Eden and its early outworking in Cain is a moral disorder that bears destructive fruit in conduct, then its remedy must involve more than information alone. It must also involve the development of character according to God's will and ways, so that wisdom may be rightly applied, obedience may be sustained, and human beings may increasingly learn to walk in the faithful *agape* love that Christ both modeled and taught. This work therefore traces one important biblical line from Eden and its ramifications toward obedient love, true discipleship, and an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:9–12 says that “we know in part” and “prophecy in part,” but that partial knowledge will give way when “the perfect” comes, and that we will then know fully, just as we have been fully known. John 16:13 says that the Spirit of truth will guide into all truth, and 1 Corinthians 2:10 says that the Spirit searches even the deep things of God. Daniel 12:4 also says that knowledge will increase, though this should be handled carefully in its own prophetic context. Taken together, these passages support humility about present partial understanding without requiring resignation to permanent immaturity or refusal of further light.

²⁵ Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. Jesus says, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” Yet Paul also says that all things are subjected to Christ except the One who subjected all things to Him. The Son's authority is therefore essentially universal, yet still ordered under the Father, who remains uniquely Most High.

²⁶ John 15:26; John 16:7. Jesus says that He Himself will send the Holy Spirit: “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father...” and “if I go, I will send Him to you.” This matters because the Son's authority to send the Spirit is part of the ordered pattern Scripture presents, and should not be overlooked when studying and implementing the Great Commission.

From there, this explanation moves outward and upward. If God alone rightfully defines good and evil, then we must ask how the New Testament speaks about God's authority. Here Scripture often preserves meaningful distinction and order. Jesus repeatedly directs our attention to the Father as the one who sent Him, taught Him, authorized Him, and whom He Himself calls "the only true God."²⁷ That does not diminish Christ. It clarifies Him. The one who became obedient for our sake was not a mere man with no prior glory, but the Word who was with God and was God.²⁸ His humbling, then, is not trivial. It is profound. He became obedient, and in doing so He modeled the reversal of the moral self-rule displayed in Eden.

But this explanation does not stop with theological insight alone. If the Son's faithfulness is the beginning of reconciliation for humanity, then His faithfulness is not presented in Scripture merely as something that resolves guilt while leaving us continuing in our sins, but as part of God's way of delivering us from our sins by giving us a model whose footsteps we must learn to follow as Christ's disciples.²⁹

Knowledge and understanding matter greatly, but by themselves they do not automatically produce conduct in keeping with God's wishes.³⁰ For that, character must be formed under God's authority, so that understanding may mature into wisdom rightly applied in holy conduct, endurance to the end, and the kind of

²⁷ John 17:3. In prayer, Jesus addresses the Father as "the only true God," while also identifying Himself as the one whom the Father has sent. This text is especially important for the present argument because it preserves both distinction and order between the Father and the Son.

²⁸ John 1:1; John 17:5; Philippians 2:6–8. The Son's obedience is not the obedience of a man with no prior glory, but of the one who was with God and was God, who shared glory with the Father before the world was, and who later humbled Himself and became obedient.

²⁹ 1 Peter 2:21; Matthew 1:21; Titus 2:11–14. Christ is presented not only as the one who suffered for all our sakes, but as the one whose steps we are called to follow. Matthew says, "He will save His people from their sins," not merely through forgiveness from the penalty of sin while leaving them unchanged in conduct. Titus likewise says that grace trains believers to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age.

³⁰ John 7:17; Psalm 111:10. Scripture does not present understanding as merely a matter of intellectual grasp. Jesus says that if anyone is willing to do God's will, he shall know concerning the teaching, and the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, with good understanding belonging to those who practice His commandments. This accords with the larger point that truth is not merely to be recognized, but received in humility and lived out in faithful conduct.

agape love that He desires us to give toward Him first and foremost, but also toward our neighbors as ourselves.³¹

Besides these things, our journey toward understanding God also requires that we understand wisdom more clearly, because wisdom that is not actually applied is not wisdom at all.³² Neither is love that is never lived out truly *agape* love.³³ Wisdom is therefore a useful building block for better understanding God and His wishes, because it helps us see why character is required even for the application of basic wisdom for our own good. That, in turn, helps us see why the higher calling of godly wisdom leading toward *agape* love requires more than knowledge and understanding. It also requires sufficient character, self-control, and self-denial to actually do the will of God.³⁴

That distinction matters because we may receive the benefits of *agape* love when it is shown toward us, and that alone may move us deeply. But to become givers of such love ourselves is another matter. That requires more than admiration. It requires formation, willingness, and practice under God's authority. Christ does not merely display *agape* love while assuming we cannot learn to do likewise. He models a way of life that must be learned by His disciples, until the love first shown to us becomes something we also increasingly give, as this work will explain.

At this point, an important clarification is needed: This is not a call to “earn” salvation by self-directed human effort according to our own ideas of righteousness, as though we could qualify ourselves apart from God's standards, which culminate in *agape* love. It is a call to respond to His command to become perfect even as our Father in heaven³⁵ is perfect—in His eyes, not in our own—to seek what pleases Him,

³¹ 1 Peter 1:15–16; Matthew 24:13; Mark 12:29–31. The Christian response is not limited to correct ideas, but includes holiness in conduct, endurance to the end, and rightly ordered love toward God and neighbor.

³² Proverbs 26:7. Wisdom that is not actually applied is useless, like a proverb in the mouth of fools.

³³ James 2:15–17. Love or faith that is never actually lived out is empty in practice.

³⁴ Romans 5:3–5. Tribulation brings about perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope that will not disappoint.

³⁵ Matthew 5:48; Colossians 3:17, 23; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Philippians 3:12–14. Jesus says, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In this context, the call includes mature, rightly ordered love that reflects the Father's own generous goodness, not self-defined perfection according to our own standards. This does not mean believers attain incorruptible perfection in this present life, but it does mean that purity, mature character, and

to have His ways formed in us, and not to be found disqualified³⁶ through neglect, passivity,³⁷ or refusal of the very transformation He intends.³⁸

Having rejected self-directed efforts to earn salvation, a second guardrail is also needed. The fruit of the Spirit should not be treated as the product of self-directed human striving, but neither should it be treated as the result of passive spiritual development or remote-controlled thought and conduct. Jesus' image of the vine and branches teaches dependence, not passivity. The branch bears fruit only by remaining in the vine, but receiving nourishment is not the same as mature fruitfulness, and Jesus warns that unfruitful branches are taken away.

God is not merely producing forgiven branches. He is cultivating fruitful ones.

progress toward sinlessness should remain our conscious aim. Paul does not claim to have already obtained or already become perfect, yet he presses on toward the goal. Likewise, Paul says, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), while Ecclesiastes says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (Eccl. 9:10), and Paul further tells believers to do their work heartily, "as for the Lord rather than for men" (Col. 3:23). The command to be perfect is not a claim that we have arrived; it is the calling toward which grace trains us to press on in word, deed, diligence, and endurance.

³⁶ The Greek term *adokimos* means unapproved after testing, rejected, or disqualified. Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 9:27 when he says that he disciplines his body and brings it into subjection lest, after preaching to others, he himself should be found *adokimos*. He uses the same term again in 2 Corinthians 13:5, where believers are urged to examine themselves whether they are in the faith, since unless Jesus Christ is truly in them, they are *adokimos*. This does not suggest mechanical control, as though Christ's presence in us cancels our own mind and will. Rather, Jesus says, "Abide in Me, and I in you" (John 15:4), and Paul says, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). The emphasis is therefore on inward conformity to Christ rather than self-directed effort on the one hand or passive possession on the other.

³⁷ Spiritual growth is not presented in Scripture as passive or automatic. Believers are urged to "apply all diligence" (2 Pet. 1:5), to discipline themselves for the race (1 Cor. 9:24–27), to practice discernment through training (Heb. 5:14), and to press on toward the goal (Phil. 3:12–14). Such language suggests that neglect is not neutral. A person who refuses training does not merely remain where he is; he becomes less prepared for faithful endurance when testing comes.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:24–27; Philippians 2:12–13; Hebrews 5:14; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Scripture does not present Christian transformation as either self-salvation by autonomous effort or passive automation performed upon us without our active participation. God works in believers "both to will and to work for His good pleasure," and for that very reason Paul says to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12–13). Likewise, Paul disciplines his body lest he be found disqualified, Hebrews speaks of those whose senses are trained by practice, and Peter urges believers to apply all diligence in supplying the qualities that lead toward maturity. The pattern is therefore not that Christ merely reprograms passive people to obey effortlessly, but that He teaches, trains, strengthens, corrects, and empowers disciples who must learn to run, strive, endure, practice, obey, and overcome under grace.

In the same discourse, abiding is connected with obedience: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.” Likewise, Paul commands believers to “walk by the Spirit,” and self-control itself is named among the Spirit’s fruit. The Spirit’s involvement in our spiritual formation and conduct does not bypass disciplined effort and self-denial; it guides, strengthens, and corrects our faithful participation as we learn to live according to the will of God in our conduct and in our fulfillment of the Great Commission.³⁹

The same balance should govern garden imagery. Paul says that one planted and another watered, but God caused the growth. That does not make the workers passive, for planting and watering still mattered.⁴⁰ Nor does it mean that guarding the environment is sufficient by itself. Eden itself was a good garden, yet Eve still decided that the forbidden tree was “good” and “desirable.” Growth therefore requires more than removing corrupting influences. It requires yielded obedience, disciplined participation, and continued refusal of moral self-rule under God.

In short, the biblical pattern is not self-directed striving, and not passive spiritual automation, but Spirit-guided, Spirit-trained, Spirit-corrected, and self-controlled participation. Jesus Himself is the model of such obedience: not weakness, passivity, or lack of capacity, but the faithful refusal of independent self-direction.

³⁹ John 15:4–10 teaches that fruitfulness depends upon abiding in Christ, for apart from Him disciples can do nothing. This should be understood in light of Jesus’ own relation to the Father: the Son does nothing “of Himself” or “on His own initiative,” not because He is powerless, but because He refuses independent self-direction and acts in faithful unity with the Father’s will. See John 5:19, 30. Yet John 15 does not present abiding as passive spiritual inactivity. Jesus connects abiding with His words remaining in His disciples, with bearing fruit, and with keeping His commandments. The New Testament speaks positively of longing for the “pure milk of the word” by which believers grow, but it also warns against remaining immature when maturity is expected. See 1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12–14. Galatians 5 likewise commands believers to “walk by the Spirit,” and then names self-control among the fruit of the Spirit. See Galatians 5:16, 22–25. Likewise, Paul commands believers to “work out” their salvation because God is at work in them, and he teaches that grace trains believers to deny ungodliness and live righteously. See Philippians 2:12–13; Titus 2:11–14. The point is not that godly fruit is produced by self-directed striving, but that the Spirit’s guidance, strengthening, and correction do not erase the disciple’s meaningful participation, practice, obedience, endurance, and growth toward maturity.

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:6–9 says that Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God caused the growth, while also calling them God’s fellow workers and saying that each will receive reward according to his own labor. This rules out both autonomous self-transformation and passive spiritual automation. God gives the growth, but the servants still plant, water, labor, and participate faithfully under Him.

Christ's *agape* love is not only given for our benefit, but also shown before us as a pattern to be learned.⁴¹ And what is first shown by Him must increasingly be shown also by His disciples.⁴² This movement may be expressed simply:

love shown → love received → love learned → love returned

What Christ first shows and gives is meant to be received, learned, and increasingly returned—not only toward God, but also outward toward others through the lives of those who follow Him.

This is no small or casual summons. Scripture presents it as a high calling: not merely to receive instruction, but to become children of God⁴³ in truth, to grow into the kind of people Christ is not ashamed to call brethren, and therefore not to neglect the diligence, character, and conduct that such a calling requires.⁴⁴

Seen in that light, this explanation turns toward wisdom, character, and *agape* love before finally discussing the under-recognized importance of the Great Commission. The mission Christ gave His followers is not merely to spread awareness, nor to gather professions of faith that never mature into active discipleship. It is to make true

⁴¹ 1 John 4:19; 1 John 3:16. We love because He first loved us. Christ's *agape* love is therefore not only something we receive with gratitude, but something we are called to learn and increasingly give. John says, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

⁴² Philippians 2:5–8. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." The mind of Christ is not presented as something merely to admire, but as something believers are called to learn, receive, and increasingly embody in humility, obedience, and self-giving conduct.

⁴³ Acts 17:28–29; John 10:34–36; Romans 8:14–23, 29; Hebrews 2:10–12; 1 John 3:1–3. Scripture speaks of human beings as God's offspring, and of believers as those being brought into mature sonship, conformed to the image of Christ, and made brethren of the Son who is not ashamed to call them such. This high calling should not be reduced to passive status alone. John says that when Christ appears, "we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is," and also says that everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself. The hope of becoming like Him therefore strengthens, rather than cancels, the call to active purification, growth, and faithful conduct.

⁴⁴ Hebrews 2:3; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Scripture does not present this calling as something to be treated lightly. Hebrews asks, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" and Peter urges believers to be diligent in supplying the qualities necessary for spiritual maturity, so as to make their calling and choosing sure and receive an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom. Such language shows that the Christian calling is both high and serious, requiring more than passive profession.

disciples, who are then able to call all nations toward repentance, baptism, and the actual observance of all that Jesus commanded.⁴⁵

The burden⁴⁶ of this explanation, then, is not merely to inform, but to move us toward a higher level of action and holiness in all our conduct according to God's standards,⁴⁷ in light of Scripture's divine inspiration for reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.⁴⁸

A claim about Scripture should not be dismissed merely because it is unfamiliar. "Surely I would already have heard it" is not careful reasoning; unfamiliarity is not the same as error. The question is whether the argument's textual sequence, scriptural reasoning, and selected contextual sources can withstand careful examination.

If the perspective set forth in these pages is sound, then the implications are not small. They touch how we understand the Garden of Eden, what true repentance entails, an important and often under-recognized dimension of Christ's sacrifice, and how grace trains and strengthens us for obedience rather than justifying continued sin.⁴⁹ They also touch the importance of holiness in all our conduct, the importance of character, how basic wisdom differs from *agape* love, and the Great Commission to which we are called by Jesus Himself.

⁴⁵ Matthew 28:19–20. The Great Commission is not merely proclamation in the abstract, but disciple-making that includes baptism and teaching others to observe all that Jesus commanded.

⁴⁶ Jesus' call is not burdenless, but neither is it oppressive in the way many fear. In Matthew 11:28–30, Jesus calls the weary to come to Him, take His yoke upon them, and learn from Him, saying that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. His way does involve self-denial, obedience, and discipleship, yet it is the path of true rest under rightful authority rather than the heavier bondage of moral autonomy, with all the discord and consequences that it provokes.

⁴⁷ 1 Peter 1:15. Holiness is required in all our conduct.

⁴⁸ 2 Timothy 3:16. Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. See also Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Scripture commends examination and testing rather than passive deference to inherited assumptions. The Bereans were called noble for examining whether what they heard was so, and believers are told to test all things and hold fast what is good.

⁴⁹ Paul does not present grace as permission to remain in sin, but as God's saving and formative provision. Grace "instruct[s] us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires" and to live "sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age," while Christ gave Himself to redeem and purify "a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." See Titus 2:11–14. This is why grace should not be reduced to pardon alone, nor treated as justification for continued rebellion. Paul expressly rejects the idea that believers should continue in sin so that grace may increase. See Romans 6:1–2. Salvation is not earned by works, yet those saved by grace are "created in Christ Jesus for good works." See Ephesians 2:8–10.

How to Follow This Sequence

Why the Order Matters

Each step in this explanation builds on what comes before it, and the order matters.

It begins in Eden and its immediate aftermath with Cain, because the nature of the human problem determines the nature of the remedy. If the true departure in Eden began before the eating of the forbidden fruit, then the root issue was moral autonomy rather than merely the breaking of a single rule or the consuming of a toxic substance. Cain's story then shows how quickly that same resistance to God's authority bears bad fruit in conduct, and why its remedy requires not only repentance, but also the development of character under God's authority so that sin may be mastered.⁵⁰

From there, the next question becomes unavoidable: if man was never authorized to define good and evil, then who rightfully holds that authority? That leads us to God's rightful authority, and from there more specifically to the Father as Most High, in Jesus' own words and in the repeated ordering within the New Testament.

The explanation then turns to the Son. If the one we now know as Jesus was with God and was God before the incarnation, then His humbling and obedience must be taken with full seriousness. Scripture says that He "became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."⁵¹ That transition matters. It models the reversal of the self-rule demonstrated in Eden. Jesus' post-resurrection exaltation, in turn, did

⁵⁰ This alludes to God's warning to Cain after Adam and Eve's sin: "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must **master** it" (Gen. 4:7). The point is significant because it occurs after Eden's transgression, yet Cain is still addressed as morally responsible, capable of doing well, and called to master the sin confronting him. Cain's refusal to master that sin did not remain an inward problem only, but quickly led to the murder of his brother Abel. In that way, Genesis 4 shows that the moral disorder first exposed in Eden leads not merely to private error, but to discord, violence, and even to the destruction of one's own brother. This supports the larger argument that the human problem is not best explained as an irresistible inherited corruption that nullifies responsibility, but as a continuing moral disorder requiring repentance and the development of sufficient character to enable self-denial under God's authority.

⁵¹ Philippians 2:8. Paul says that Christ "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." This wording matters because it presents obedience as central to Christ's self-humbling and to the pattern His followers are called to learn.

not end His obedience, but crowned Him with delegated authority while He remained under the authority of the Father: “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.”⁵²

From there, the explanation turns to human spiritual development and maturity under God. Christ’s faithfulness in good conduct is not a substitute for our learning to follow His example as His disciples. His example is certainly not a reason or justification for us to continue in sin. Information must become knowledge, knowledge must deepen into understanding, understanding must be embodied in wisdom, wisdom requires character,⁵³ and character must be ordered toward godliness, so that all of these may be brought toward their higher fulfillment in unselfish *agape* love—not just in word, but also in conduct.

In that sense, the Christian life is not merely the possession of correct understanding, but the formation of stronger, godly character in persons who are willing and able to stand in the day of adversity,⁵⁴ remain faithful under pressure, bear good fruit in God’s eyes, overcome adversity,⁵⁵ and give cheerfully for the good of others⁵⁶ while loving and serving God above all.

The explanation then culminates in the Great Commission because the end of the matter is more than understanding alone. If God is reconciling humans from moral

⁵² John 20:17. After His resurrection, Jesus says, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.” This is significant because the risen Christ still speaks of the Father as both His Father and His God, preserving the ordered relationship between the exalted Son and the Father even after the resurrection.

⁵³ Wisdom is treated more fully in Step 8 as understanding applied. This matters because a person may understand what is good and still fail to do it; therefore wisdom requires the character needed to apply understanding faithfully in actual conduct.

⁵⁴ Proverbs 24:10; Ephesians 6:13. Proverbs says, “If you are slack in the day of distress, your strength is limited,” and Paul tells believers to take up the full armor of God “so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” This supports the point that spiritual maturity must include strength of character able to endure testing, not merely understanding in calm conditions.

⁵⁵ John 16:33; Romans 12:21; Revelation 2–3. Jesus tells His disciples, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” Paul says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” The letters to the churches likewise repeatedly promise reward “to him who overcomes.” Such language shows that Christian maturity is not merely surviving adversity, but faithfully overcoming it under Christ.

⁵⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:7; Acts 20:35; Philippians 2:4. Scripture commends not reluctant giving, but cheerful giving, and says, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Believers are also told not merely to look to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. This reflects the outward-facing character required for mature *agape* love.

autonomy into conformity to His will and His ways, then those who begin to walk Christ's path must also help call others into it. The Great Commission is therefore not merely about proclamation, but about becoming disciples and making disciples of all nations: teaching others to observe all that Christ commanded, and serving as best we can to reflect His example in our own conduct as we mature.

The final vision gathers the whole explanation into a picture of true servanthood in God's eyes: not self-exaltation, but humility with strength in serving God's good ways and purposes; not divisive self-rule, but rightly ordered unity; not passive religion declaring information without repentance, but fruit-bearing, enduring, overcoming, teaching others, and giving the gift of *agape* love according to the Father's will.

The sequence traced in this work therefore moves from Eden's valuation before eating, to mankind's assumption of moral prerogative, to the meaning of becoming "like one of Us, knowing good and evil." It then turns to Christ's obedient reversal of Eden's moral self-rule, and to repentance as the yielding of that moral prerogative back to God. From there, the argument shows why understanding must be applied: when applied for one's own good, understanding becomes wisdom; when applied for the good of others, especially at cost, it moves toward *agape* love. Character enables such application to be practiced faithfully, while godliness orders character under God's will, so that developed capacity does not merely strengthen self-rule but matures toward kindness, *agape* love, and faithful discipleship. Finally, the Great Commission appears not as an unrelated task added at the end, but as mature *agape* love moving outward in deed, so that those who have received and learned Christ's way help others become disciples who observe all that He commanded.

A reader will therefore profit most by following **Steps 1–9** in order. The earlier steps identify the root cause of our problem. The middle steps clarify the Father and the Son and their former, current, and future relationship. The later steps show why knowledge must further develop into wisdom with character and *agape* love, which is not just received, but also given as our gift to God and to others. The sequence culminates in Step 9, turning toward the mission to which we have all been called: the Great Commission, by which we help others and ourselves become

the kind of faithful citizens who will not be found unfruitful or unfit for God's everlasting kingdom.⁵⁷

Lastly, readers may follow the main argument without stopping at every footnote, while using the notes for biblical support, clarification, further illumination, and engagement with likely questions or objections. Some notes simply document the argument; others expand or illuminate connections that would distract if placed in the main text. Because the argument develops cumulatively, some central ideas are also intentionally reinforced as the sequence unfolds, to help readers retain the thread, recover context where needed, and see how earlier observations bear upon later conclusions.

The aim is not to make the argument clever, but faithful enough, clear enough, and scripturally grounded enough that it cannot be easily dismissed by those willing to weigh the evidence honestly. Comments welcome: info@nutrigenetics.net

⁵⁷ 2 Peter 1:5–11. Peter urges believers to apply all diligence in supplying the qualities that lead toward maturity, warning that if these qualities are lacking, a person is blind or shortsighted, having forgotten his purification from former sins. But if these qualities are present and increasing, they render believers neither useless nor unfruitful, and they support an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom.

Part I — The Problem

How the Human Crisis Actually Began

The opening steps argue that mankind's decisive departure from God did not begin merely with a forbidden act, but with the prior willingness and decision to define good and evil apart from God. If that is so, then the root problem in Eden was moral autonomy, with all the conflict and disorder that it produces — which means that the remedy must address far more than guilt alone.

Step 1 — The Departure Began Before the Eating

The fruit did not create the rebellion. It revealed it.

Many Christians are taught to think of the Garden of Eden mainly in terms of the eating of the forbidden fruit, as though the fruit itself were the cause of mankind's downfall. In that common telling, Adam and Eve ate, something changed within them, and human corruption followed. But Genesis 3 presents a sequence that deserves closer attention, because it points to a more important causal order.

The text says that Eve saw that the tree was good for food, that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was desirable to make one wise before she ate.⁵⁸ That order matters: she judged before she ate, forming her own valuation of the forbidden tree before taking its fruit. The eating was therefore not the first movement away from God. It was the outward act that expressed a prior inward departure from God's will.

This is one of the most important hinges in the whole explanation. The actual sin of eating the forbidden fruit was the consequence of Adam and Eve's prior willingness to define good and evil for themselves. Their act did not create that inward posture; it revealed it. If so, then our own morally autonomous thinking is not best understood as the consequence of some toxic property in the fruit, but as the same kind of moral self-rule—doing what is right in our own eyes instead of what is right in God's eyes—that was proven by their act of eating.

⁵⁸ Genesis 3:6. Eve saw that the tree was “good for food,” “a delight to the eyes,” and “desirable to make one wise” before she ate.

That point sharply affects how the Eden account is usually understood. On the more familiar Augustinian sequence, the act of eating is treated as the decisive cause of corruption making all mankind guilty: first the act, then the inward ruin. But Genesis 3 appears to show the reverse: first the inward willingness to adopt one's own valuation over God's word, then the confirming act of transgression. If so, the fruit was not the true source of rebellion or guilt; the deeper problem was the willingness and decision to become morally self-directing, proven by acting upon it.

This does not make the act of eating unimportant. On the contrary, it was crucial, because sin for Adam and Eve was not merely a passing temptation or inward contemplation, but the transition from temptation to intention that led to actual transgression.⁵⁹

Scripture allows us to distinguish the outward transgression of a command from the inward movement that made transgression desirable. In Eden, the eating of the fruit violated God's explicit command, but Genesis 3:6 shows that the forbidden tree had already been revalued as "good" and "desirable" before the act itself. This means the fall should not be described as though Adam and Eve were morally untouched until the instant they ate. The act of eating was the transgression, but it was preceded by an inward turn toward self-defined good and evil.⁶⁰

Paul's later emphasis on Adam does not erase Eve's deception or the inward revaluation seen in Genesis 3:6. Rather, Adam's transgression is decisive because

⁵⁹ James 1:14–15. James says that each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust; then, when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin. This supports the distinction between temptation itself and the inward movement that embraces desire and brings it toward sinful action.

⁶⁰ Romans 5:13; Romans 4:15; 1 John 3:4. Paul writes that "until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law," and also that "where there is no law, there also is no violation." John likewise says that "sin is lawlessness." These passages caution against collapsing every aspect of sin into the single moment of formal transgression. In Eden, the command not to eat from the forbidden tree supplied the explicit point at which Adam and Eve violated God's command. Yet Genesis 3:6 shows that before the eating, the forbidden tree had already been revalued as "good," "desirable," and able to make one wise. The fall should therefore not be described as though Adam and Eve were morally untouched until the instant they ate. The act of eating was the transgression, but it was preceded by an inward turn toward self-defined good and evil.

he had received God's command directly, was not deceived in the same way, and nevertheless followed the violation rather than correcting it.⁶¹

Mankind's ongoing misconduct is not best explained as a subsequent effect triggered by the fruit or its eating. It is better understood as the recurring human preference to define good and evil on our own terms. The act of eating did not come first; it followed, confirming and exposing the intentional departure from God's authority.

Seen in that light, God's words after the transgression take on a revealing meaning: "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil."⁶² Eve and Adam had indeed become like God in this forbidden respect—not merely recognizing good and evil, but knowing them in the sense of defining them for themselves, just as the serpent had said.

If God Himself confirms that man had become "like one of Us" in this respect, then we must ask more carefully what Scripture means by "knowing good and evil."

⁶¹ Genesis 2:16–17; 3:2–6, 12; Romans 5:12–19; 1 Timothy 2:14. Paul's emphasis on Adam does not require Eve's deception or prior revaluation of the tree to be ignored. Genesis shows Eve being deceived and seeing the tree as "good," "desirable," and able to make one wise before the eating, while Paul treats Adam's transgression as decisive for the entrance of sin and death. This may be because Adam received the command directly, was not deceived in the same way, and nevertheless followed the transgression rather than correcting it. Eve's statement that they were not even to "touch" the tree may suggest that the command had already become blurred, expanded, or misunderstood, though Genesis does not explicitly say whether this came from Adam, Eve, or another failure of transmission. Adam's later response—"the woman whom You gave to be with me"—also shows evasion of responsibility rather than repentance. Thus Paul's focus on Adam does not erase the inward movement in Eve; it identifies Adam's accountable participation as decisive.

⁶² Genesis 3:22. God's statement that man had become "like one of Us, knowing good and evil" requires careful attention to what "knowing good and evil" means. Step 2 argues that the phrase should not be reduced to mere moral awareness, but includes the forbidden taking up of moral prerogative—the attempt to define good and evil apart from God.

Step 2 — Knowing Good and Evil as Moral Prerogative

Man was never authorized by God to be his own moral center.

This question matters because much of the force of the Eden account depends on how that phrase is understood. If “knowing good and evil” means only recognizing moral distinctions in an intellectual or perceptive sense, then the story can be read mainly as a prohibition against gaining knowledge too soon to manage it properly. But if “knowing good and evil” includes the taking to oneself of the right to define or declare what is good and evil, or desirable and undesirable, then the story points to something far deeper. It points to an unauthorized seizure of moral prerogative to define good and evil apart from God.

That reading makes good sense of the serpent’s temptation. The appeal was not simply, “You will become more informed,” nor merely the thrill of forbidden behavior. It was, “You will be like God.”⁶³ The issue, then, was not mere awareness, but God-likeness in the authority—whether given or assumed—to define good and evil. The temptation was to step into a role that belonged properly to God as Creator. It was therefore not only a temptation toward disobedience, but toward usurpation.

This is why the sequence in Genesis 3 is so revealing. Eve did not act by blind impulse alone. She assessed the tree, regarding it as good for food, delightful to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise. That means she was not deferring to God’s determination on the matter, but entertaining and then adopting her own ideas about what was good and desirable.⁶⁴ The issue was therefore not simply an error in applying God’s standards, but the exercise of independent judgment in defiance of God’s word.

Understanding “knowing good and evil” in this way should not be confused with merely discerning God’s will. Human beings are, after all, called to grow in

⁶³ Genesis 3:5. The serpent’s temptation was that they would become “like God.”

⁶⁴ Genesis 3:6. Eve’s judgment that the tree was “good,” “a delight,” and “desirable” is stated before she ate. This sequence matters because it shows that the outward act followed an inward revaluation of the forbidden tree on human terms rather than continued submission to God’s word.

discernment. The root problem in Eden was not the desire for godly discernment, but the reach for moral autonomy.

This is also suggested by God's first questions after the transgression. He asks, "Who told you that you were naked?" and immediately follows with, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The pairing is revealing. The question "Who told you?" presses the matter of moral source: by whose word, judgment, or standard did they now regard their nakedness as something requiring concealment? Their new perception was not necessarily a sign of enhanced awareness; it reflected a movement from living by God's values to operating by values of their own.

This does not mean Adam and Eve were already guilty before they ate. But it does mean we should not imagine them as already mature, tested, and perfect in every way. They had been given God's command about the forbidden fruit, but they had not yet learned to bring every thought into subjection to God's ways. The sequence therefore reveals not only the act of eating the forbidden fruit, but the absence of the spiritual maturity God ultimately desires and later reveals more fully in Scripture and in Christ.⁶⁵

They moved from receptivity under God to self-authorized judgments about good and evil, desirable and undesirable—not only regarding the forbidden tree, but even in the way they came to view their own nakedness.

Eve did not only see the tree as "good" and "desirable" in a general sense; she also saw it as "desirable to make one wise."⁶⁶ This detail is revealing. Scripture does not condemn the pursuit of godly wisdom, but it does warn against being wise in

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 10:5; Genesis 2:16–17; Genesis 3:6. Paul speaks of "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." Adam and Eve had received God's command concerning the tree, but Genesis 3:6 shows that Eve's desire, valuation, and reasoning were not yet aligned with God's ways as later revealed more fully in Christ. This does not require saying that they were already guilty before eating, but it does caution against treating pre-fall Eden as though Adam and Eve had already reached the maturity God ultimately desires.

⁶⁶ Genesis 3:5–6; Proverbs 3:7; Proverbs 26:12. The serpent promised that Adam and Eve would become "like God, knowing good and evil," while Genesis 3:6 reports Eve's own assessment that the tree was "desirable to make one wise." The text does not explicitly equate becoming "like God" with becoming wise, but it may suggest that Eve interpreted the serpent's promise partly in terms of gaining wisdom for herself. This matters because Scripture elsewhere warns against being wise in one's own eyes. The issue is not wisdom itself, but the pursuit of wisdom on self-authorized terms rather than in humble submission to God.

one's own eyes. The text is therefore not condemning wisdom itself. It is exposing the attraction of becoming wise on one's own terms, apart from God's wishes.

Human beings are not invited or authorized to invent the moral order, but to receive it, learn it, and walk in it. This is one reason the language of doing what is "right in one's own eyes" carries such a dark significance throughout Scripture.⁶⁷ It is not a description of harmless personal preference. It is the recurring pattern of moral independence from God.

Some modern explanations speak as if Adam and Eve's act were a stage of growth toward becoming more like God in maturity. But Scripture does not present independence from God as spiritual maturity. It presents moral autonomy as the road toward ruin.

The same principle can be seen, though only by analogy, in ordinary parental authority. A child may regard a parent's curfew as arbitrary, excessive, or even unfair. Yet the child's perception does not determine whether the command is wise, loving, or right. The parent may see dangers the child does not see, may be restraining attitudes the child does not recognize, or may be forming habits the child does not yet value. Still, God should not be obeyed merely because He has more information, greater experience, or superior foresight. His wisdom is real, but His authority is deeper still. The Father is not constrained by what seems right to man, because He is the highest moral authority, the One by whom good and evil are rightly known and defined. He may even test us in ways that expose whether we will call good evil simply because His command does not conform to our expectations. What seems wrong from below may be rightly ordered from above.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Judges 17:6; Judges 21:25. Doing what is right in one's own eyes is a recurring biblical pattern of disorder.

⁶⁸ Genesis 3:6; Hebrews 12:9–10; Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; Psalm 145:17; Job 40:2, 8; Isaiah 5:20. The analogy is limited because earthly fathers act under authority, while the Father of spirits is the highest moral authority. Hebrews says earthly fathers disciplined "as seemed best to them," but God disciplines "for our good"—a good ultimately bound up with the preservation of rightly ordered harmony and unity under His rule. The point, then, is not merely that God sees the good more accurately than we do, as though good were an independent standard He recognized better than we recognize it. The deeper point is that the Father Himself is the final moral authority by whom good and evil must be rightly known and defined, according to His authority rather than our own. His goodness must not be called into account by creaturely perception, and His commands are not rendered unjust because they do not conform to what "seems right" to man.

So it is that some things that seem right to us may still be wrong in God's sight. Some things that appear arbitrary to us may in fact be holy, proper, or right because God has set them apart. What counts as clean or unclean, righteous or unrighteous, proper or improper, is not always something we can rightly determine for ourselves. God must show us what is good in His eyes, for we are not entitled to define it for ourselves.⁶⁹ That is why the underlying issue in Eden was so serious.

This helps explain why the Garden story illuminates the human condition from then until now. The same tendency toward moral autonomy – moral self-rule – that appeared in Eden remains active wherever we operate by our own definitions rather than God's.

That is why repentance must involve yielding that prerogative back to God. It must mean renouncing the posture that assumes we are entitled to define for ourselves what is good or evil in matters God has already judged or revealed. It must mean becoming teachable again. For matters that belong to God, it must mean learning to say not merely, "I made a mistake," but, "I see now that I was never given the right to define right and wrong for myself in the first place."

If the problem were merely ignorance, then the solution would be mere instruction. A person may know many religious texts academically and still remain deeply committed to self-rule in how he conducts his life. The issue is not whether we can recognize moral matters, but whether we are willing to receive those moral principles from God on His terms.

Importantly, this helps us understand why the words in Genesis 3:22 must not be treated lightly: "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil." If "knowing good and evil" there means more than mere awareness, and instead includes the prerogative of defining good and evil, then the "Us" in that verse cannot be reduced to a casual expression of heavenly plurality. It points to

⁶⁹ Micah 6:8. Micah says, "**He has told you, O man, what is good**; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The point is significant: good is not ours to define independently; it must be received from God and followed in humble obedience.

those who already properly possessed the authority to define good and evil, but did so in harmony with one another.⁷⁰

Eve and Adam became, in this specific and forbidden respect, like “one of Us.” The post-eating state is therefore presented as wrongful self-exaltation: making themselves like God, like the Most High who defines good and evil.

So the real issue in Genesis 3 was not that mankind became aware that moral distinctions exist. The issue was that mankind stepped into moral self-rule.

“Knowing good and evil” should therefore be read not merely as perception, but as moral prerogative—rightly exercised by God, or wrongly seized by man. The sin in Eden was not simply an errant act. It was a revolt at the level of authority itself.

If Eden was a revolt at the level of authority, then the next question is why that authority belongs to God alone, and why seizing it leads not to godly wisdom, but to ruin.

⁷⁰ Amos 3:3 KJV; Matthew 12:25. Amos asks, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” The wording here follows the KJV because it states the principle memorably. The verse is not cited to interpret Genesis 3:22 directly, but to support the broader point that shared action implies agreement. Jesus likewise says that “any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand” (Matt. 12:25). If the “Us” in Genesis 3:22 refers to those who properly possess divine authority to define good and evil, then that authority is not exercised in rivalry or discord, but in harmony. By contrast, Isaiah 14:12–14 presents a revealing pattern of upward grasping after Godlike status, culminating in the boast, “I will make myself like the Most High.” The serpent’s suggestion that Adam and Eve could become “like God,” knowing good and evil, appears to extend that same spirit of creaturely self-exaltation into human temptation.

Step 3 — Why God Must Define Good and Evil

A house built on rival self-definitions cannot stand.

If the problem in Eden was moral self-rule, then why must God be the one who defines good and evil for us? Why should His definitions govern our conduct rather than our own preferences, instincts, judgments, or conclusions?

One way to picture the problem is to think of a shared game. A game cannot be played well if every player, coach, or official reserves the right to redefine the rules whenever they do not suit him. The exact rules of a game may vary, but once the rules are established, the game depends on submission to a common standard. Otherwise, play collapses into argument, manipulation, and conflict. Human life under God is far more serious than a game, but the analogy helps illustrate the point: rival rule-makers cannot produce enduring harmony.

This does not mean every ordinary choice must be governed by church authority or require outside permission or approval. It means that where God has made His will known, we are not free to replace His judgments with our own, but must learn to live by every word that proceeds from God.⁷¹

For many modern readers, such deference to God sounds restrictive or unnecessary. People often assume that good and evil are largely self-evident, or that with enough maturity and reflection we should be able to arrive at valid moral conclusions on our own. But Scripture does not present man as an independent source of moral authority capable of producing lasting good results. If we all go our own way, human experience shows that destructive outcomes follow.

This point is easy to overlook because some things do seem obviously right or wrong to us. Most people recognize that murder, cruelty, or betrayal are wrong. From this, many assume that moral values can be recognized in a largely self-directed way, as though human beings could reason their way into a stable moral

⁷¹ Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4. Moses says that man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Jesus repeats this in His temptation, saying, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” The point is not that every ordinary choice requires outside permission, but that where God has spoken, His word—not autonomous human judgment—must govern the faithful response.

order if given enough time and experience. But that confidence breaks down quickly wherever people disagree over what should be called good, evil, just, unjust, acceptable, or unacceptable. In a shared world, rival self-definitions do not remain private. They become competing claims about what may be chosen, defended, imposed, excused, or condemned.

Genesis itself shows how quickly this disorder bears destructive fruit. The very next chapter after Eden records Cain killing his brother Abel. Moral self-rule does not remain an abstract inward problem for long; when acted upon, it becomes conflict, violence, and the destruction of one's own brother.⁷²

Scripture confirms that destructive conflicts arise from competing desires working within ungodly people. "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?"⁷³

Scripture warns that "evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse,"⁷⁴ and "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."⁷⁵ For example, the Sabbath command does not arise from an obvious moral necessity, yet it is treated in Scripture as a matter of obedience to God's authority.

A similar principle appears in matters of clean and unclean. Peter refused to eat what he regarded as unclean, but the heavenly voice told him, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."⁷⁶ The point is not merely dietary. The point is that clean and unclean are not categories man is authorized to define independently. If God declares something clean, man must not insist on calling it unclean. Likewise, if God declares something unclean, man must not call it clean. The authority lies with God.

Paul makes the same principle strikingly clear when he says that nothing is unclean of itself, but that for the person who considers something to be unclean, "to him it

⁷² Genesis 4:1–8. Cain's murder of Abel occurs immediately after the Eden account, showing how quickly the disorder first displayed in Genesis 3 bears fruit in human relationships. The point is not merely that sin continued, but that moral disorder moved rapidly from inward resistance to God's warning into violence against a brother.

⁷³ James 4:1. Conflict grows out of competing self-centered desires.

⁷⁴ 2 Timothy 3:13. Scripture warns that evil does not remain static. Corrupt moral trajectories tend not toward stability, but toward further deception and deterioration.

⁷⁵ Proverbs 14:12; Proverbs 16:25. What seems right to man may still end in death.

⁷⁶ Acts 10:15. Peter's vision shows that categories such as clean and unclean are not self-defining. Their status depends on God's declaration.

is unclean.” Significantly, Paul says in that passage that he is convinced of this “in the Lord Jesus” — and some translations read “by the Lord Jesus” — which shows that even such judgments are not treated as properly self-evident conclusions. They must be understood under God’s authority, not merely according to human perception.⁷⁷

Abraham provides another important example. When God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham faced a command that must have seemed profoundly difficult and even contrary to ordinary human judgment, even seemingly contrary to God’s nature.⁷⁸

A person self-governed by an autonomously defined moral system might easily have concluded that obedience in such a case would be immoral. But Abraham trusted God to the point of remaining obedient even where the path was almost impossible to understand, and even at great personal cost.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Romans 14:14; Acts 10:15; Exodus 20:8–11. Paul’s statement that nothing is unclean of itself does not make clean and unclean categories autonomous human inventions. He says he is convinced “in the Lord Jesus,” and Peter is told, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” The point is that such categories are governed by God’s declaration rather than by independent human judgment. The Sabbath command illustrates a similar principle: something may be set apart as holy because God sets it apart, even when its holiness is not obvious from ordinary human reasoning alone.

⁷⁸ Genesis 22:1–18; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Hebrews 11:17–19. Abraham’s test is not presented only as a model for avoiding autonomous moral improvisation, but also as a severe test of deference to God’s command when that command was difficult to understand. Abraham might have reasoned, as many modern people would, that God was testing whether he could recognize child sacrifice as evil and refuse it. But that would have placed Abraham’s own moral judgment above the specific command God had given. The later prophetic condemnations in Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, and 32:35 make clear that child sacrifice was never a standing moral good, but Abraham’s test required him first to obey the God who defines what is good and remains faithful to His own character. Hebrews indicates that Abraham also trusted God to fulfill His promise through Isaac, even if that required resurrection.

⁷⁹ Genesis 22:1–18; Hebrews 11:17–19. Abraham trusted God not only to fulfill His promise through Isaac, but also as the One who rightfully defines what is good and righteous. His obedience required deference to God’s authority even when the command exceeded Abraham’s understanding. Abraham did not place God’s command beneath the judgment of autonomous moral reasoning; he trusted God’s authority, faithfulness, and rightful prerogative to define good and evil.

Again, God is not whimsical or capricious, but He alone deserves the position of rightful moral authority, because the alternative is the kind of anarchy that so easily and quickly devolves into the strong imposing their will on the weak, often resulting in victimization, coercion, and fear.

Realizing this, God's will should not be considered as just another option among many. He is the Creator, the one whose judgments are deservedly authoritative, and whose house must remain united if it is to stand – not only short-term, but forever and ever.

All this explains why Scripture can say both that God **is** good, and that God shows us what is good.⁸⁰

This is one reason the language of being “wise in one's own eyes” is treated so seriously in Scripture.⁸¹ To be wise in one's own eyes easily leads to self-authorization or self-justification.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve succumbed to that temptation by deciding that the forbidden tree was desirable to make one wise. The problem was not the pursuit of wisdom itself, but the pursuit of wisdom on self-authorized terms—worldly “wisdom” in her own eyes, revealing independent moral ambition.⁸²

Under moral autonomy (self-rule), moral language itself becomes unstable, because “good” and “evil” are increasingly bent toward self-protection, self-advancement, appetite, tribe, or power. That is why Satan's way of urging that we can all become “like” God produces bad fruits like fragmentation, suspicion, accusation, rivalry, and harm.

A house built on rival self-definitions cannot stand, since when iniquity abounds, the *agape* love of many grows cold.⁸³

⁸⁰ Micah 6:8; Mark 10:18. Scripture can say both that God alone is good in the highest sense, and that He has shown man what is good. Good is not external to God as though He merely consults it, nor is it ours to define independently. It is shown by the One who rightfully defines it.

⁸¹ Proverbs 3:7; 26:12. Scripture treats self-assured wisdom as spiritually dangerous because it tempts man to trust his own judgment where humility and submission are required.

⁸² James 3:14–17. Scripture distinguishes wisdom from above from the self-seeking and worldly “wisdom” that can arise from selfish ambition.

⁸³ Matthew 24:12. Where lawlessness increases, love does not mature—it grows cold.

Just as Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁸⁴

So the issue is not whether human beings can make moral observations or discern God’s wishes. Of course we can. The issue is whether we will follow our own ideas about right and wrong instead of receiving and obeying the revealed will of God. That is why Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom of God and **His** righteousness. True righteousness is not something we construct for ourselves; it is something we receive from God and learn to walk in faithfully.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Micah 6:8. Micah summarizes what God requires: justice, kindness, and humble walking with God.

⁸⁵ Matthew 6:33. [Emphasis added.] The emphasis here is not merely on “righteousness” in a vague sense, nor on whatever may seem righteous in our own eyes, but on **HIS** righteousness—that is, righteousness as defined by the King whose kingdom is being sought. This accords with the larger argument of this work: true righteousness must be received from God rather than self-defined.

Part II — The Father, the Son, and the Reversal of Eden

How Christ's Story Answers Eden's Problem

If mankind's true problem is moral autonomy, then the next question becomes unavoidable: who rightfully holds the moral authority man tried to seize? These steps argue that Jesus directs us to the Father as the only true God, while the Son's humbling, obedience, death, and resurrection reveal the true reversal of Eden and the disciple-forming shape of salvation.

Step 4 — The Father as Most High and the “Only True God”

When Jesus calls the Father “the only true God,” we should believe Him.

If Eden reveals the true fall as the exertion of moral self-rule, then the next question is unavoidable: who, then, rightfully stands at the center of moral authority? If mankind was never given the right to define good and evil for itself, then that right remains where it always belonged—with God.⁸⁶ But here Scripture presses us further, because the New Testament often speaks about God in ways that preserve meaningful distinction and order. Jesus consistently directs attention specifically to the Father as the ultimate standard of authority and goodness, and even as His own source of divine authority.⁸⁷

This becomes especially important because many Christians have been taught ways of thinking and speaking about God that can blur distinctions Scripture itself

⁸⁶ Genesis 2:16–17; Genesis 3:5, 22; Micah 6:8; Mark 10:18. In Eden, God gives the command concerning the tree, while the serpent tempts mankind toward becoming “like God, knowing good and evil.” After the transgression, God Himself says that man has become “like one of Us, knowing good and evil.” This supports the argument that the issue concerns moral prerogative, not mere awareness. Micah says that God has shown man what is good, and Jesus says, “No one is good except God alone.” Together these passages support the claim that good is not mankind's to define independently, but must be received from the One who rightfully defines and reveals it.

⁸⁷ John 5:19, 26–27, 30; 7:16–18; 8:28–29; 12:49–50; 14:28; 17:3; Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. Jesus repeatedly identifies the Father as the One who sent Him, taught Him, gave Him words to speak, gave Him works to accomplish, and granted Him authority. Jesus also says, “the Father is greater than I,” and addresses the Father as “the only true God.” Even the Son's universal authority is described as given to Him, and Paul clarifies that all things are subjected to the Son except the One who subjected all things to Him. These passages preserve both Christ's exalted authority and the Father's unique position as source and ultimate authority.

preserves. The result is that readers may affirm that “God defines good and evil,” yet fail to ask how the New Testament itself speaks about the Father and the Son in relation to that authority. But the biblical pattern is not silent. Jesus speaks of the Father as the one who sent Him, taught Him what to say, authorized Him, whom He calls “the only true God,” and who remains greater than He is—even after His resurrection.⁸⁸

Jesus’ own words in John 17:3, where He addresses the Father as “the only true God,” are so familiar that many readers glide past them. Yet they deserve focused and lingering attention. Jesus is not speaking as though the Father were one among several co-equal centers of ultimate authority. He identifies the Father as the only true God, while also identifying Himself as the one whom the Father has sent.⁸⁹ The distinction is plain, and the ordering is plain.

That does not diminish the status of Jesus as the one who in the beginning was with God and was God.⁹⁰ It clarifies Him. The point is that Jesus’ own language preserves a real distinction: the Father is identified by Jesus as the only true God, in keeping with the Son’s humbling and becoming obedient.⁹¹ This is also consistent with the Scripture, “I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me.”⁹²

Jesus says, “My Father is greater than I.” He says, “I do nothing on My own initiative.” He says that the Father has given Him works to accomplish, words to

⁸⁸ John 20:17. After His resurrection, Jesus says, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.” This matters because the risen and exalted Christ still speaks of the Father as His Father and His God, preserving the ordered relation between the Son and the Father after the resurrection.

⁸⁹ John 17:3. Jesus identifies the Father as “the only true God.”

⁹⁰ John 1:1. The Word was with God and was God in the beginning.

⁹¹ John 17:3; Philippians 2:6–8; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. Jesus identifies the Father as “the only true God,” and this is consistent with the Son’s humbling and becoming obedient, as Paul says in Philippians. The point is not that the Son is thereby diminished into something merely creaturely, but that His own language and obedience preserve the distinction and ordering Scripture itself maintains: the Father as uniquely Most High, and the Son as the obedient and exalted one under Him.

⁹² 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; Hebrews 1:5; Acts 13:33. Hebrews applies the words “I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me” to Christ, alongside Psalm 2:7: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You.” This supports the point that Father-Son language is not merely decorative, but tied to meaningful sonship, appointment, enduring relation, and ordering within God’s redemptive purpose.

speaking, and authority to exercise.⁹³ Even after the resurrection, He speaks of “My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.”⁹⁴ These statements are not random or incidental. They consistently present the Father as the one who remains ultimate in authority, even while the Son is exalted, honored, and entrusted with delegated authority over all else.

That is why the Father’s status as Most High matters so much in this explanation. If the real problem in Eden was the attempt to seize moral prerogative, then the authority to define good and evil must return to the one who still truly possesses that rightful authority, as Jesus Himself acknowledges it. Having become obedient, Jesus models obedient sonship as the firstborn of many brethren to follow.⁹⁵ He receives instruction and obeys. He lives by every word that proceeds from God. He speaks what the Father gives Him to speak. He does what the Father gives Him to do. In that sense, the Son’s life is our model, reversing the moral autonomy first illustrated in the Garden of Eden and echoed in the proud aspiration described in Ezekiel 28 with regard to becoming “like God,” or in Isaiah 14 to becoming “like the Most High.”⁹⁶

This should not be misunderstood as though the Son’s statement that He can do nothing on His own initiative refers merely to incapacity. The point is deeper and more important for discipleship. The faithful Son does not act from autonomous self-will, but from perfect deference to the Father who sent Him. His judgment is just because He does not seek His own will, but the will of the Father. In that respect, Jesus’ words expose the opposite of Edenic autonomy. Adam and Eve reached beyond God’s command in order to become like God on self-authorized terms; Jesus, though worthy of the highest honor and plausibly included among the “Us” of Genesis 3:22, yields to the Father’s will. He shows us that faithful sonship is not moral initiative detached from God, but chosen obedience under the Father’s authority.⁹⁷

⁹³ John 14:28; John 8:28; John 5:19, 30; John 12:49–50; Matthew 28:18. Jesus’ works, words, and authority are received from the Father.

⁹⁴ John 20:17. Even after resurrection, Jesus speaks of “My God and your God.”

⁹⁵ Romans 8:29. Jesus is the firstborn among many brethren.

⁹⁶ Ezekiel 28:2, 6; Isaiah 14:13–14. Proud aspiration to become “like God” or “like the Most High” is condemned.

⁹⁷ John 5:19, 30; John 8:28–29; John 12:49–50; John 14:10; John 1:1–3; John 17:5; Philippians 2:6–8; Genesis 3:22. Jesus says that “the Son can do nothing of Himself” except what He sees the Father doing, and also, “I can do nothing on My own initiative.” Yet He immediately

The language of “only true God” cannot be brushed aside as a passing phrase of little doctrinal weight. It belongs to a larger pattern in which the Father is presented as supreme in authority.

That does not require us to deny the Son’s pre-incarnate glory as the one who in the beginning was with God and was God. But it does require us to listen carefully to how those realities are ordered.

The New Testament does not present the Son as totally independent of the Father, nor as one who has again become co-Most-High. It presents Him as now the faithful Son whose glory is expressed in obedience and in His exalted status as King of kings, as one to whom all authority has been delegated in heaven and on earth, and before whom every knee will bow.⁹⁸

That distinction helps clear up two opposite errors. On one side is the error of flattening the Father and the post-resurrection Son into a vague sameness or into an equality of authority that obscures the New Testament’s repeated ordering. On the other side is the error of diminishing Christ into a mere creature. Scripture does neither. It gives the Son a glory that He shared with the Father before His incarnation, and a post-incarnation name above every name except the Father’s, while still preserving the Father’s status as Most High, as the one Jesus Himself calls the only true God.⁹⁹

This also helps explain why the Father’s status as Most High is not an abstract technical issue, but a moral and discipleship issue. If Jesus humbled Himself by

explains that His judgment is just because He does not seek His own will, but the will of Him who sent Him. The point should not be reduced to bare inability, as though Jesus lacked agency in a mechanical sense. Rather, His agency is perfectly ordered under the Father. He speaks what the Father gives Him to speak, does the works of the Father, and remains pleasing to the Father because He always does the things that are pleasing to Him. If the “Us” of Genesis 3:22 includes the pre-incarnate Word, as John 1:1–3 and John 17:5 make plausible, then the contrast is especially striking: humanity wrongfully reached for divine prerogative, while the Son, though truly sharing divine glory before the world was, later humbled Himself and became obedient under the Father. This is why the Son’s obedience is so relevant for discipleship: He does not model autonomous self-expression, but faithful action that refuses to go beyond the Father’s will.⁹⁸ Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:9–11; Revelation 19:16. The Son’s exalted lordship is real, universal, and publicly confessed.

⁹⁹ Philippians 2:9–11; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. Christ is given the name above every name, yet Paul explicitly says that when all things are subjected to Christ, this excludes the One who subjected all things to Him. The Son’s exaltation is therefore universal in scope, yet still ordered under the Father.

becoming obedient and remains humble, even though He did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, then our own path cannot justify or rationalize one of self-definition or moral autonomy either.¹⁰⁰ The pattern runs downward in ordered beauty: the Word who was in the beginning with God and was God willingly humbled Himself as a Son; the Father sends the Son; the Son reveals the Father and serves as our model; the disciples are made and trained, and then sent via the Great Commission to call all nations to repentance and to teach all nations to observe and obey all that Jesus commanded.¹⁰¹

Some readers may fear that emphasizing the Father as now the only true God and the only Most High somehow robs Christ of honor. But the New Testament presents the matter the other way around. The Son's honor is not lessened by His obedience to the Father; it is revealed through it. Jesus' faithfulness in spite of His sufferings, and His humble obedience and service to all, display the beauty of His *agape* love and the magnitude of His sacrifice of status for all our sakes, as the model we also are called to follow. The Son's post-resurrection glory is not the glory of self-asserted autonomy or equality of authority with the Father, but of perfect alignment under the Father's will for us all, in keeping with Jesus' own teaching that greatness in God's kingdom belongs to those willing to become least and servant of all.¹⁰²

This matters because many traditions either teach or assume that Jesus is now once again equal to God the Father in terms of authority, sometimes even calling Jesus "true God of true God" in a way that implies present co-Most-High rule. But even

¹⁰⁰ Philippians 2:5–8. Paul introduces Christ's humbling by saying, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." Christ's obedience is therefore not presented only as something accomplished for our benefit, but also as the pattern His followers are called to learn. The one who existed in equality with God did not grasp for status, but humbled Himself and became obedient. If even the Son chose the path of obedience under the Father's will, then His disciples cannot justify moral self-rule as though freedom from obedience were the goal. Christ's humbling therefore forbids self-exaltation, self-definition, and moral autonomy as the pattern for those who follow Him.

¹⁰¹ Matthew 28:18–20. The Great Commission extends the ordered pattern outward through disciple-making.

¹⁰² Mark 9:35; Mark 10:43–45; Philippians 2:8–11. Jesus teaches that "whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant," and that "even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." He also says, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Greatness in God's kingdom is therefore servant greatness, not self-exaltation. This fits Philippians 2, where Christ humbles Himself in obedience before being highly exalted by God.

if Jesus, before becoming the Son, was God according to John 1 and among the “Us” of Genesis 3, after His resurrection He still said, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.”¹⁰³ That statement must be allowed to do its work.

For this reason, the Father’s status as now the only Most High is not merely a point to be defended in discussion. Its recognition is part of the remedy for the rebellious human condition. Eden illustrates mankind’s tendency to reach upward and seize. Jesus models and teaches mankind to defer to God, trust Him, and obey. This does require sacrifice on our part, including the surrender of self-rule and the offering of a humble and contrite heart. Yet even this sacrifice is small compared with the magnitude of Christ’s becoming obedient: the One who shared divine glory humbled Himself under the Father’s will for the sake of us all.¹⁰⁴

So when Jesus calls the Father “the only true God,” we should not rush to explain the words away. We should let them do their work. They direct us to the Father as now the ultimate center of divine authority, while at the same time directing us to the faithful Son: the one sent, having humbled Himself in obedience, uniquely exalted by the Father, and given to us as our model and the captain of our salvation.¹⁰⁵ That ordering is not a riddle to solve. It is part of the beauty Scripture wants us to see.

If the Father remains the enduring center of divine authority, then the next question becomes unavoidable: who was the one who humbled Himself into obedient sonship, and what kind of glory did He possess before that transition?

¹⁰³ John 20:17. This post-resurrection statement preserves the Father/Son ordering.

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 51:17; Philippians 2:6–8. David says, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” This shows that God does value the inward sacrifice of humility, contrition, and surrendered self-rule. Yet Christ’s sacrifice is greater in magnitude: the One who existed in equality with God humbled Himself and became obedient, even to the point of death.

¹⁰⁵ Hebrews 2:10; John 17:3. Jesus is both the captain of salvation and the one who directs attention to the Father.

Step 5 — From Pre-Incarnate Glory to Obedient Sonship

Where Adam reached upward, Jesus humbled Himself.

If the Father's status as Most High is real and enduring, then an obvious question follows: what are we to make of the one we now know as Jesus before He became flesh, and how does that pre-incarnate glory help us understand His later obedience as Son? This question matters because the New Testament does not present Jesus as though He simply began to exist in Bethlehem, nor does it present His obedience as though it were merely an outward appearance or temporary condition. Rather, it points us to a deeper distinction: the one who became obedient for all our sakes was not a mere man with no prior glory, but the pre-incarnate Word who was with God and was God.¹⁰⁶

John opens his Gospel with language that is both simple and profound: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."¹⁰⁷ John then declares that this same Word "became flesh, and dwelt among us." In other words, the one who walked among men, obeyed the Father, suffered, died, and was exalted is the same one who was with God and was God in the beginning.

John's Gospel also helps explain why this divine status should not be flattened into simple identity with the Father. Scripture records real encounters in which people saw or encountered God, including Moses being permitted to see God's "back" while protected in the cleft of the rock. Yet Jesus says that no one has seen the Father, heard His voice, or seen His form, except the One who is from God. This means that Scripture can speak of God being seen, encountered, or manifested without requiring that every such encounter be treated as an unqualified sight of

¹⁰⁶ John 1:1; John 1:14; John 17:5; Philippians 2:6–8. John identifies the Word as the one who was "with God" and "was God" in the beginning, and then says that this same Word became flesh. Jesus also speaks of the glory He had with the Father before the world was. Paul likewise presents Christ as one who existed in the form of God before humbling Himself and becoming obedient.

¹⁰⁷ John 1:1. The Word existed with God and as God from the beginning.

the Father Himself. The Son reveals the Father, is sent by the Father, and has seen the Father; but He is not therefore identical to the Father who sent Him.¹⁰⁸

This matters greatly. If the one who became flesh already existed in divine glory before the incarnation, then His later obedience must be seen as something He voluntarily entered into in a new way for the sake of the salvation plan. He did not remain in the same form of relation He had formerly enjoyed as the Word who was with God and was God. Rather, He humbled Himself into obedient sonship.

This is where Philippians 2 becomes especially important. Paul says that Christ Jesus, “although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself,” took the form of a servant, and became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”¹⁰⁹ The older King James Version rendering, “thought it not robbery to be equal with God,” is also striking, because it highlights the same basic point from another angle: equality with God was not a usurpation on His part. That stands in deliberate contrast with Adam and Eve. They reached upward toward what was not given. Christ, by contrast, did not selfishly cling to what was already His in the highest sense, but emptied Himself and entered the path of obedience, becoming our model as part of God’s way of saving us from our sins.

This is one of the strongest reasons for concluding that the one later known as Jesus enjoyed the highest divine dignity before the incarnation, making it reasonable to understand Him as included in the “Us” of Genesis 3.¹¹⁰ Paul also describes Christ as one who already stood in relation to equality with God before

¹⁰⁸ Exodus 33:20–23; John 1:18; 5:37; 6:46. Moses is permitted to see God’s “back” after being protected in the cleft of the rock, yet Jesus says that no one has seen the Father, heard His voice, or seen His form (John 5:37), except the One who is from God. This suggests that Old Testament encounters with God should not be flattened into unqualified sightings of the Father Himself. Scripture allows for real divine manifestation or mediation while preserving the Father’s unique unseen status and the Son’s role as the One who reveals Him.

¹⁰⁹ Philippians 2:6–8. Christ’s humbling and obedience are central to the contrast with Eden.

¹¹⁰ John says that before the incarnation, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Jesus later identifies the Father as “the only true God” (John 17:3), and Paul says that all things are subjected under Christ except the One who subjected all things to Him (1 Cor. 15:27–28). Taken together, these passages support the conclusion that the one later known as Jesus possessed the highest divine dignity before His humbling, while now remaining subject to the Father as the exalted Son. This makes it reasonable to understand Him as included in the divine “Us” of Genesis 3.

humbling Himself.¹¹¹ These points do not answer every possible theological question by themselves, but they do make Christ's pre-incarnate condition exalted indeed.

This is precisely where Genesis 3:22 takes on added force. God says, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil."¹¹² If that phrase refers, as argued earlier, not merely to moral awareness but to the prerogative of defining good and evil, then the "Us" in that verse refers to those who already properly possessed that authority. In that case, the point is not merely that man became more perceptive, but that man illicitly seized a prerogative belonging to the divine plurality revealed in the Garden account.

This strengthens the case that the pre-incarnate Word shared in the divine prerogative that mankind has consistently sought to usurp, from Eden to the present. The incarnation marked the self-humbling of one who had formerly shared the highest divine status with God and who later entered into obedient sonship, for all our sakes.

Jesus Himself speaks in a way that fits this pattern when He prays, "Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."¹¹³ This is the language of one referring to a real pre-incarnate glory shared with the Father. Yet this need not mean that the post-resurrection Son resumes, in every respect, the same former relation of authority. Other passages indicate that His exalted glory is now manifested in delegated authority and honor as God the Father's firstborn Son.

The phrase "became obedient" carries much weight, implying a real transition and not mere appearance.

¹¹¹ Philippians 2:6–8. Paul's wording places Christ's "form of God" and relation to "equality with God" prior to His self-emptying, servant-form, and obedience unto death. This supports the argument that Christ's later obedience was not the obedience of one who began without divine glory, but the voluntary humbling of one who already possessed the highest divine dignity.

¹¹² Genesis 3:22. God's statement that man had become "like one of Us, knowing good and evil" is most naturally read here not as mere moral awareness, but as a forbidden entry into the realm of moral prerogative that belonged properly to the divine "Us." This is also consistent with the broader scriptural witness that the Word was God (John 1:1), and that equality with God was not a usurpation on His part (Phil. 2:6), which supports the argument that such divine prerogative properly belonged to Him before His humbling, and that the one who later became Jesus was included in that "Us" of Genesis 3.

¹¹³ John 17:5. Jesus speaks of glory shared with the Father before the world was.

Scripture's teaching that God "does not change" should be understood as a statement of steadfast character, faithfulness, and reliability — not as though God were incapable of responding, sending, exalting, humbling, judging, relenting, or delegating authority within His own purpose.¹¹⁴ The present argument is therefore not that God became morally different, but that the one who had formerly stood in the highest divine status entered into obedient sonship in a real and lasting way.

This is one reason the Father/Son language of Scripture must be taken with full seriousness. God says, "I will be a Father to Him and He shall be a Son to Me," and again, "Today I have begotten You." These are not naturally read as expressions of a relation described only in temporary terms, but as language pointing to a meaningful and enduring Father-Son designation within God's unfolding purpose. The word "today" especially suggests a specific point in time of lasting significance, which fits the present argument that this designation was not merely apparent or transient.¹¹⁵

That is also why the Father's love and the Son's love are both demonstrated here. God the Father so loved the world that He sent His Son.¹¹⁶ And the Son so loved the Father, and us, that He answered that calling in faithful obedience, even to the point of a cruel death, both as our model and to free us from the fear of death.¹¹⁷ This was not done out of weakness or necessity. Jesus Himself said that He could have called for legions of angels to deliver Him from that hour.¹¹⁸ His obedience was chosen. His sacrifice was willing. His humiliation was embraced.

The magnitude of Christ's sacrifice is not found only in what He suffered, but in who He was when He chose the path of obedience. The Word who "was God,"

¹¹⁴ Psalm 115:3; Mark 14:36. Scripture's teaching that God does not change should not be taken to mean that He is inert or incapable of responsive action within His own righteous purpose. The psalmist says, "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases," which emphasizes God's sovereign freedom rather than a frozen inability to act according to His will. Likewise, Jesus says, "All things are possible for You," which confirms that the Father is not limited in power or in the ordering of His own will. God's unchanging character therefore does not prevent ordered action, sending, exalting, humbling, judging, relenting, or willing response within His own purpose, nor would it prevent the Word from humbling Himself and becoming obedient as our living model, whose steps we also are called to follow.

¹¹⁵ Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Hebrews 1:5; Acts 13:33. "Today I have begotten You" supports the meaningful Father-Son designation.

¹¹⁶ John 3:16. The Father's love is shown in sending the Son.

¹¹⁷ Hebrews 2:14–15. The Son's work frees from the fear of death.

¹¹⁸ Matthew 26:53. Jesus' sacrifice was willing, not compelled by helplessness.

who shared glory with the Father before the world was, and who existed in equality with God, humbled Himself and became obedient. His sacrifice is therefore not merely the suffering of a righteous man, but the self-humbling of the One who came down from divine glory to obey the Father's will.¹¹⁹

This realization helps us avoid two opposite errors. One error is to speak as though Jesus were only a man and nothing more, as though the New Testament began His story at birth and ended with His exaltation. The other error is to speak as though His incarnation and obedience involved no real and lasting transition, as though His humbling were only temporary. Scripture resists both. It tells us that the one who came down from heaven was truly from above, and it also tells us that He truly humbled Himself and became obedient as our model.¹²⁰ His exaltation therefore does not erase His obedience; it displays the Father's approval of it.¹²¹

This is one reason Christ's obedience should not be treated as a passing detail or a temporary phase later discarded. The one who became obedient remains the firstborn among many brethren.¹²² He remains the faithful Son. He remains the pattern for reconciled humanity. He remains the one who shows us what greatness

¹¹⁹ John 1:1; John 17:5; Philippians 2:6–8; Hebrews 2:14–18. The point is not to minimize the physical suffering of the cross, but to recognize that the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice also includes the height from which He humbled Himself. Others may suffer greatly for God, but Christ's sacrifice is unique because the one who was with God and was God, who shared glory with the Father before the world was, and who existed in equality with God, entered obedient suffering and death for all our sakes.

¹²⁰ John 3:13, 31; John 6:38; Philippians 2:8. Jesus is presented as the one who came down from heaven, not as a merely earthly teacher. His obedience therefore belongs to His real humbling: He came down, did the Father's will, and became obedient even to death. In that sense, His life is not only saving in effect, but also exemplary in form.

¹²¹ John 1:1; Philippians 2:6–8; John 10:34–36; John 17:3; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28; Hebrews 1:5; 2:10–12; Romans 8:29. John says the Word “was God,” and Paul says Christ existed in equality with God before humbling Himself and becoming obedient. Jesus also answers the charge of making Himself God by appealing to the Scripture, “I said, you are gods,” and then identifying Himself as the One sanctified and sent by the Father, the Son of God. Scripture therefore permits divine or “god” language without erasing distinction, order, mission, and sonship. All things are subjected to the Son, except the One who subjected all things to Him, and the Son Himself is finally subjected so that God may be all in all. Christ is not diminished by being the faithful Son; His glory is displayed in the obedience by which He perfectly embodies the Father's will and becomes the firstborn among many brethren.

¹²² Romans 8:29; Hebrews 2:10–12. Jesus is the “firstborn among many brethren,” and Hebrews says that He is not ashamed to call them brethren. This supports the point that His sonship and brotherly relation to redeemed humanity are not temporary roles to be discarded, but part of the enduring pattern into which God is bringing many sons to glory.

looks like under the Father's rule, for Jesus speaks the Father's words, "He who is least in the kingdom is greatest."¹²³

That is also why the later ordering of all things does not erase His former highest glory. Rather, it illuminates the magnitude of His self-humbling. There is nothing that shall not be put under the feet of Jesus except the one who put all things under His feet—that is, the Father Himself.¹²⁴ This means that the Son's exalted authority is universal over all creation, yet still ordered under the Father. The one now subject only to the Father is the same one who once shared the highest divine glory before becoming obedient. That contrast does not weaken the case. It strengthens it, because it shows that a real transition in ordering has taken place.

This is why Philippians 2 remains so important. The passage does not merely tell us that Jesus suffered. It tells us what kind of mind was in Him: one that did not grasp, but humbled itself; one that did not seize, but obeyed. The contrast with what happened in Eden is difficult to miss. In Eden, mankind reached upward in self-assertion. In Christ, the one who had shared divine glory descended into humble faithfulness that gives, even at great cost.

Christ's obedience is therefore not a side detail of the gospel, but central to the pattern humanity must learn to follow.¹²⁵

¹²³ Matthew 23:11; John 12:49–50. Jesus teaches that "the greatest among you shall be your servant," and He also says that the Father gave Him commandment concerning what to say and what to speak. This supports the point that Jesus' teaching about kingdom greatness reflects the Father's own values, not an independent definition of greatness detached from the Father's rule.

¹²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:27. All things are under the Son except the Father who subjected them.

¹²⁵ Jesus came to save His people from their sins, not to leave them forgiven but unchanged. His shedding of blood and His suffering on the cross should never be minimized, but neither should they be isolated from the humble obedience that gave them their meaning. The central sacrifice, in this framing, is the willing self-humbling of One who had the right to equality with God—the One we now know as God the Father—and who nevertheless humbled Himself and became obedient as our model. In that humble obedience, Jesus demonstrated the reversal of the moral autonomy, or moral self-rule, that has marked mankind from the beginning, even before Adam and Eve actually carried out the act of eating the forbidden fruit. Jesus modeled what we also must learn to become willing and able to do: yield self-rule back to God, obey the Father's will, and walk faithfully even when loving God or others becomes costly, or even cross-bearing. God works in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure, but that work does not bypass our participation; it calls us into faithful character development, self-controlled obedience, and agape love modeled by God and embodied by Christ.

Step 6 — Salvation Must Be More Than Pardon

The gospel does not address guilt alone; it calls for true repentance, love for God in return, and the resurrection hope that frees people from fear when obedience proves costly.

If Eden's root problem was moral self-rule, then salvation must address more than guilt. Many presentations of salvation make it sound as though the central problem is only that a penalty must be paid. Certainly guilt is real, and certainly forgiveness matters. But if mankind's deeper rebellion is the refusal to yield the right to define good and evil back to God, then pardon alone would leave the root problem unresolved. What is needed is not only forgiveness for past sins, but repentance from doing what is right in our own eyes instead of yielding to what is right in God's eyes. Salvation must therefore include a new way of life—one in which we learn, under Christ, to grow in wisdom, faithfulness, and *agape* love as we mature.

Some readers may wonder whether this emphasis on repentance, obedience, character, and discipleship risks presenting a different gospel. May it never be. The question is not whether this emphasis differs from some common modern reductions of the gospel, but whether it differs from the gospel proclaimed in Scripture. Paul does not allow us to treat grace as permission to continue in sin, nor does Jude permit the grace of God to be turned into licentiousness. The purpose here is not to replace the gospel of Jesus Christ, but to resist reductions of that gospel that Scripture itself does not permit.¹²⁶

This same balance appears in Paul's command to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," which he immediately grounds in the fact that "it is God who

¹²⁶ Galatians 1:6–9; Romans 6:1–2; Jude 4; Titus 2:11–14. Paul's warning against a "different gospel" should be taken seriously, but Paul also rejects the idea that grace permits continued sin: "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" Jude likewise warns against turning the grace of God into licentiousness, while Titus describes grace as bringing salvation and instructing believers to deny ungodliness and live rightly. The concern here is therefore not to replace grace with legalism, but to resist reductions of the gospel that detach grace from repentance, training, and faithful response.

is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”¹²⁷ Because God is at work in us for His good pleasure, His work should move us toward active, fruitful obedience rather than passive expectation. God’s inward work summons our response, trains our will, motivates and guides our effort, and gives our development its proper direction toward mature, godly character. We should no more expect God to do all the work of our development apart from our response than an athlete should expect his coach to run the race for him. The coach may teach, train, correct, strengthen, and direct the runner, but the runner must still run.

Paul’s athletic imagery reinforces the same point. When he tells believers to “run in such a way that you may win,” he is not calling them to passive admiration from the sidelines, nor is he teaching them to treat one another as rivals to be defeated. Rather, he is calling each disciple to active, disciplined participation in the race set before them. The crown is not pursued by stepping on others, but by refusing laziness, self-indulgence, and divided allegiance. God’s children are not meant to remain spiritual infants who merely watch, wish, or approve from a distance; they are to grow into responsible and contributing maturity as they learn to run faithfully, receive correction humbly, endure hardship, and help others continue toward the finish.¹²⁸

At the same time, this active participation must not be confused with self-salvation. No sinner earns reconciliation with God as a wage, and no one obligates God by moral effort, religious discipline, ministry, sacrifice, fasting, prayer, or personal righteousness. God may count faith as righteousness before righteousness is fully developed. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Yet Scripture does not treat such reckoning as permission to remain undeveloped,

¹²⁷ Philippians 2:12–13. Paul holds together the believer’s active obedience and God’s inward work: believers are commanded to “work out” their salvation because God is at work in them “both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” God’s work is therefore not presented as a reason for passivity, but as the enabling ground and proper direction for faithful participation.

¹²⁸ See 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, where Paul urges believers to run in such a way as to win and speaks of disciplining his body; Hebrews 12:1–2, where believers are exhorted to run with endurance the race set before them, laying aside hindrances and fixing their eyes on Jesus; Philippians 2:3–4, where humility and concern for others guard obedience from selfish ambition; and 2 Peter 1:5–8, where believers are told to make every effort to add to faith the qualities that lead toward mature fruitfulness.

disobedient, or self-ruled. James cites Abraham also, and says that Abraham's faith was working with his works, and that by the works his faith was perfected.¹²⁹

This distinction matters. Faith counted as righteousness must not be treated as though God's gracious reckoning makes actual unrighteousness harmless. Haggai gives a sobering illustration: holiness is not automatically transferred by contact, while uncleanness can defile what it touches. The point is not that God cannot forgive, cleanse, or restore; the point is that holiness should not be treated as an external label that leaves uncleanness unchanged. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet makes a related point from another direction: the one who has bathed does not need the whole bath repeated, but his feet still need washing. Prior cleansing is real, but the dust of the walk still matters.¹³⁰

Grace likewise must not be confused with automatic final approval apart from faithful response. Grace may set apart, shelter, instruct, warn, forgive, cleanse, and give opportunity; but grace does not make continued moral autonomy — moral self-rule — safe. The grace of God brings salvation and instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age.¹³¹

Therefore the true gospel should not be reduced to pardon without repentance, confession of Jesus as Lord without obedience, or grace without training. Christ came to save His people from their sins, not to provide religious confidence while leaving them at peace with sin. The good news is that God has acted through Jesus

¹²⁹ Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3–8; James 2:21–24. Paul rightly uses Abraham to show that righteousness is not earned as a wage by works of the Law or self-produced merit. Yet James cites the same Abraham account to show that genuine faith is completed or brought to maturity by obedient action. Faith may be counted as righteousness before righteousness is fully developed, but Scripture does not treat such reckoning as permission to remain undeveloped, disobedient, or self-ruled.

¹³⁰ Haggai 2:11–14; John 13:6–11; 1 John 1:7–9; James 4:8. Haggai cautions against treating holiness as mechanically transferable while uncleanness remains unchanged. Jesus' foot-washing distinction shows that prior cleansing does not make the soiling of the walk irrelevant. John connects cleansing with walking in the Light and confessing sin, while James commands sinners to cleanse their hands and purify their hearts.

¹³¹ Titus 2:11–14; 1 Corinthians 7:14; 1 Corinthians 10:1–12; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Grace may set apart, instruct, warn, and give opportunity, but Scripture does not equate such privilege with automatic final approval. Israel's wilderness generation was delivered and set apart, yet Paul uses their failure as a warning. Peter likewise urges diligence in developing the qualities that lead to an abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom.

Christ to call sinners out of moral self-rule and back into reconciliation with Himself, and to show us the way of return. Jesus humbled Himself, became obedient, learned obedience through the things He suffered, and demonstrated in lived obedience the way back to the Father's will. His obedience is not given to disciples as a substitute for their own obedience, but for their instruction, imitation, and training. Those who receive grace are therefore called to follow Him, not to use grace as an excuse to remain unchanged. The gospel is not that God excuses moral self-rule; the gospel is that God has made a way out of it—and Jesus Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life.¹³²

With that clarification in view, Paul does not allow us to treat the saving work of Christ as though it were fully explained by His death considered in isolation. He certainly says that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3), but when he presses the decisive issue, his emphasis falls on the resurrection: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (v. 14); indeed, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (v. 17).

This shows that the saving significance of Jesus' work cannot be reduced to death alone, as though reconciliation were completed by a momentary transaction at the cross. Rather, His suffering and death are inseparable from God's vindication of Him in resurrection and His glorious reward as our model—realities that give believers hope and free them from the fear of death, which might otherwise bind us.¹³³

¹³² Matthew 1:21; Philippians 2:5–8; Hebrews 5:8; Luke 9:23; John 13:15–17; 1 Peter 2:21; Matthew 28:19–20. Christ came to save His people from their sins, not merely from consequences while leaving them at peace with sin. The Son humbled Himself and became obedient, learned obedience through the things He suffered, and calls His disciples to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him. Jesus explicitly says He gave His disciples an example, and Peter likewise says Christ left an example for believers to follow in His steps. The Great Commission therefore includes teaching disciples to observe all that He commanded.

¹³³ Hebrews 2:14–15; Hebrews 12:2; Romans 8:17–18. Hebrews says that Jesus shared in flesh and blood so that through death He might render powerless the one who had the power of death and free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery. It also says that Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame “for the joy set before Him.” Paul likewise says that if we suffer with Christ, we may also be glorified with Him. This connects Christ's resurrection hope and exaltation with the believer's own call to endure faithfully under costly obedience, so that we too may share in His glory.

This also bears directly on human bondage. Hebrews says that Jesus partook of flesh and blood so that “through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Heb. 2:14–15). The resurrection therefore matters not only as confirmation of Jesus’ victory, but as the beginning of freedom from one of humanity’s deepest forms of bondage: fearful self-preservation.

Christ’s resurrection declares that death is no longer the final master over those who belong to Him. The one who obediently laid down His life has been raised and exalted; therefore His followers are not called merely to admire His sacrifice from a distance, but to be progressively freed to walk in that same pattern of faithful, *agape* love.

For this reason, the call to lay down our lives for the brethren is not detached from the gospel, but grows out of it. “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16). And because Jesus teaches that what is done for “one of the least of these brothers of Mine” is done for Him (Matt. 25:40), *agape* love toward the brethren is not only service to others, but faithfulness to Christ Himself.

That is why Jesus matters as our model. Even in Gethsemane, where His distress is laid bare, His posture remains: “not My will, but Yours.”¹³⁴ That is the reversal of Eden in one of its clearest forms. Jesus did and does what Adam and Eve failed to do: He walks as a true Son under the Father’s will. That is why His obedience is so revealing, and why it carries such saving significance when we follow in His steps.¹³⁵

Discipleship cannot be treated as an optional extra. If Jesus reverses Eden not only by resisting sin, but by obeying the Father through suffering and death, then those reconciled through Him must be drawn into that same pattern. To follow Christ is not merely to admire or thank Him, but to become His disciple, increasingly

¹³⁴ Luke 22:42. In Gethsemane, Jesus expresses His desire openly, yet submits it fully to the Father’s will: “not My will, but Yours.” This makes the scene one of the clearest reversals of Eden in the Gospels, because the Son refuses moral self-rule and remains obedient even under extreme distress.

¹³⁵ 1 Peter 2:21. Christ’s suffering is not presented only as something done for us, but also as a pattern left for us to follow, since believers are called to follow in His steps.

yielding our own will to the Father's will, while still bringing our requests before Him in trust.¹³⁶

All this helps explain why the Great Commission is so important. Jesus does not merely say, "Tell the nations what I have done." He says, "Make disciples," and "teach them to observe all that I commanded you."¹³⁷ That is not accidental. The mission of the church is not exhausted by announcing pardon. It includes forming people in obedience. That does not compete with grace. It is one of the things grace is for. Grace trains, forms, and strengthens people to walk the path Jesus Himself walked.¹³⁸

The call is not merely to begin, but to continue with endurance to the end,¹³⁹ which is why He warns people to count the cost.¹⁴⁰ This is why He says the gate is narrow and the way is difficult. This is why He tells His disciples to deny themselves and take up their crosses. These are not rhetorical suggestions, but descriptions of the path we must learn to walk more faithfully as we mature.

This also helps explain why the idea of salvation without growth into godly conduct is so dangerous. If people assume, or are taught, that salvation is already complete in a way that makes their response, endurance, and conduct inconsequential, then the urgency of discipleship collapses. But Scripture does not speak that way. Scripture repeatedly combines promise with warning,¹⁴¹ grace with

¹³⁶ Philippians 4:6; Luke 22:42. Believers are invited to make their requests known to God, yet Jesus Himself models that such requests must remain subordinate to the Father's will. Prayer therefore does not authorize self-rule, but trains trustful submission.

¹³⁷ Matthew 28:19–20. The Great Commission is not limited to proclamation alone, but includes making disciples and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded.

¹³⁸ Titus 2:11–14. Grace is not permission to remain passive or continue in sin. It trains believers to deny ungodliness, live uprightly, and become zealous for good deeds.

¹³⁹ Matthew 24:13; John 15:4–10. Jesus speaks not only of beginning, but of continuing: enduring to the end, abiding in Him, and remaining in His love through obedience. These passages support the emphasis that discipleship is ongoing rather than merely initial.

¹⁴⁰ Luke 14:28; Matthew 7:13–14; Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23. Jesus repeatedly describes discipleship as costly: the narrow way, counting the cost, denying oneself, and taking up the cross. These are not rhetorical flourishes, but descriptions of the path His followers must actually walk.

¹⁴¹ Proverbs 29:1. "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy." This warning reinforces the seriousness of persistent resistance to correction. Scripture does not treat correction as meaningless, nor does it present continued neglect or hardening as spiritually harmless. Reproof is given so that a person may turn, but resistance to it leads toward ruin.

responsibility, and calling with endurance. Lasting reconciliation with God therefore requires a path of growth and holy conduct that must be walked and lived out as we mature.

If Christ's obedience answers the rebellion first displayed in Eden, then human response matters deeply. Repentance from living by what is right in our own eyes matters. Trusting God matters. Perseverance matters. Character matters. Conduct matters. Not because we save ourselves by these things, but because the salvation Christ brings is meant to realign us from moral autonomy into obedient love in deed, not merely in word. A message that leaves people unchanged in conduct has not yet reached the full beauty and intention of the true gospel. Christ's humbling and His example are therefore not merely admirable; they are foundational. In Him, the Father's will is not resisted, revised, or set aside, but received, embraced, and carried out, even at cost. That is how Christ answers Eden, and that is why the Son's obedience and example stand at the center of the gospel.

Part III — The Remedy, the Formation, and the Mission

Why Understanding Must Become Discipleship

Christ models for us the way out of moral self-rule into obedient life under the Father's will. We therefore cannot stop with passive religious understanding, mere professions of faith, or appeals to imputed righteousness that leave transformation aside. We must become disciples indeed, so that understanding and wisdom mature with godly character into agape love, and the Great Commission becomes the highest outward expression of mature discipleship.

Step 7 — Understanding Alone Is Not Enough

Jesus does not merely say, "Understand Me." He says, "Follow Me."

If Christ's saving work provides forgiveness and release from the fear of death, then the Christian response cannot stop at correct understanding or mere profession of belief. It must become lived-out discipleship.

At this point in the explanation, a serious misunderstanding must be addressed. Someone might hear what has been said so far about Eden, the Father's status as Most High, the Son's obedience, and reconciled humanity, and conclude that the answer to mankind's problem is simply to understand these things correctly. But that conclusion would be profoundly incomplete. Understanding matters greatly, but understanding alone is not enough. Even a better understanding of God, if it remains only intellectual, will not by itself produce the faithful conduct God desires.

A person may understand many things clearly and still fail to act upon them. He may know what is good for him and still not do it. He may know that a path is dangerous and still choose it. He may know that another way is wiser and still walk or live the way that seems more comfortable or desirable. Knowledge by itself, even when deepened into understanding, does not ensure obedience. Recognition by itself does not produce transformed conduct.

That is one reason the problem in Eden cannot be reduced to ignorance or the foolishness of a child.¹⁴² Adam and Eve were not left without instruction. Adam, at least, was not confused about what God had said, and Eve also knew they had been warned not to eat from the forbidden tree.¹⁴³ The issue was not that they lacked information. Knowing what God had said, they were still willing to entertain a different standard and then act upon it. Their rupture with God was not merely intellectual error, but moral self-rule. As Proverbs says, “A slave will not be instructed by words alone; for though he understands, there will be no response.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast, true sons are expected to do the works of their father, and each person becomes servant of the one whom he obeys.¹⁴⁵

This is where many religious assumptions and teachings go astray. They assume that once truth is presented, understood, and accepted, the essential work is mostly done. On this logic, understanding becomes nearly everything, but Scripture presents a more demanding picture. God seeks people who will humble themselves, repent from doing things their own way, learn to obey, endure, and be transformed—not only knowing what is right, but doing what is right in His eyes. The issue is not whether we can describe the truth, but whether we are willing to live it out.

This helps explain why Scripture places such emphasis on response. We are told to seek God while He may be found. We are told that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. We are called to repent, believe, deny ourselves, take up the cross, endure to the end, walk by the Spirit, grow in holiness, and even lay down

¹⁴² Proverbs 22:15. Proverbs says, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.” The point here is not to reduce Eden to childish immaturity, but to distinguish ordinary folly needing correction from the deeper issue in Eden: moral self-rule in the face of God’s command.

¹⁴³ Genesis 2:16–17; Genesis 3:2–3. Adam and Eve were not left without instruction. The issue in Eden was therefore not a lack of command, but the willingness to act against what had been made known.

¹⁴⁴ Proverbs 29:19; John 10:12–13. Proverbs shows that even when a person understands what is said, he may still fail to respond responsibly. The point is not to approve harsh mastery, but to underline the larger principle that instruction alone does not necessarily produce obedience, even when the words are understood. Jesus’ contrast between the good shepherd and the hired hand likewise shows that when danger comes, those who lack faithful commitment may flee rather than endure.

¹⁴⁵ John 8:39; Romans 6:16. True sonship is shown in conduct, and each person becomes servant of the one whom he obeys.

our lives for the brethren if required.¹⁴⁶ None of this makes sense if understanding alone were sufficient. These commands assume that human response matters, and that what we do—or fail to do—with what we are shown has real consequence.

This also helps explain why fatalistic or deterministic assumptions can be so damaging. If people conclude that the outcome is fixed regardless of their response and conduct, then the urgency of repentance, obedience, vigilance, and discipleship is weakened. But Scripture does not speak that way. Nineveh's repentance mattered and changed the course of events. Moses' intercession mattered and changed the course of events. Jesus' obedience mattered, and God intends that it should change the course of our conduct as we become Christ's disciples. The warnings to the churches matter, so that their lampstands will not be removed. The repeated call to endure matters, for he who endures to the end shall be saved. Peter's warning that "it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved" likewise cuts against any presumption that final salvation should be treated as a foregone conclusion detached from faithful endurance, sober judgment, and continued obedience.¹⁴⁷ The Great Commission itself confirms that faithful participation matters: Christ commands His disciples to make disciples, teaching them to observe all that He commanded, because such obedience can make a genuine difference.¹⁴⁸

That does not mean salvation is earned by human effort, nor that the grace needed to learn and grow becomes unnecessary. On the contrary, grace is indispensable because it is needed to bring us back onto the right path with God. But grace in Scripture is not permission to remain passive or continue in sin. Paul asks whether

¹⁴⁶ Isaiah 55:6; Hebrews 11:6; Matthew 16:24; Matthew 24:13; Galatians 5:16; 1 Peter 1:15–16; 1 John 3:16. Scripture's calls to seek, repent, endure, walk, and even lay down one's life assume real response and real growth.

¹⁴⁷ 1 Peter 4:17–18; Matthew 24:13; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Peter writes that judgment begins with the household of God and then asks, "And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?" The KJV renders the phrase, "if the righteous scarcely be saved." This does not mean salvation is earned by human effort, but it does resist any presumption that the outcome should be treated as mechanically settled in a way that makes endurance, vigilance, repentance, and proven character irrelevant. Jesus likewise says that the one who endures to the end will be saved, and Peter urges believers to be diligent in supplying the qualities that make their calling and choosing sure.

¹⁴⁸ Jonah 3:5–10; Exodus 32:9–14; Revelation 2:5; Matthew 24:13; Matthew 28:19–20. Repentance, intercession, warning, endurance, and mission are all treated as consequential rather than irrelevant.

believers should continue in sin so that grace may increase, and answers with the strongest possible rejection: “May it never be!”¹⁴⁹ Grace does not excuse the continuation of the very rebellion from which Christ came to save us.

Titus makes the same point positively. The grace of God does not merely pardon; it trains believers toward a new way of life:

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, **instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age**, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to **redeem us from every lawless deed**, and to **purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.**”¹⁵⁰ [Emphasis added.]

Grace therefore teaches. Grace trains. Grace strengthens. Grace does not eliminate the need for response; it teaches and directs the response God desires.

Grace may be compared, in part, to the patience rightly shown toward young children while they are still learning. A good father does not despise an infant for needing milk, stumbling, or requiring correction. But neither does he intend the child to remain childish forever. Immaturity may be patiently borne for a time, but maturity is still expected. Paul says, “When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”¹⁵¹ In the same way, grace bears with weakness while training us toward maturity; it is not permission to remain immature, passive, or unchanged.

That is why the New Testament often joins what common perception wrongly separates: God works in us to will and to do His good pleasure, and therefore we

¹⁴⁹ Romans 6:1–2. Paul directly rejects the idea that grace permits continued sin: “Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!” This should prevent grace from being treated as license, permissiveness, or cover for ongoing rebellion.

¹⁵⁰ Titus 2:11–14, emphasis added. The word translated “instructing” in the NASB carries the sense of training, disciplining, educating, or forming conduct. The passage should not be reduced to pardon alone, since Paul explicitly says grace instructs believers to deny ungodliness, live righteously, and become zealous for good deeds. See also Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Timothy 4:7–8; 2 Peter 1:5–11.

¹⁵¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11. See also 1 Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12–14; Ephesians 4:14–15. Scripture speaks positively of milk for growth, but also warns against remaining immature when maturity should have developed. Grace may patiently bear with weakness, but it does not redefine immaturity as the goal.

are to work out our salvation.¹⁵² We are saved by grace, not by works as though we could boast; yet those saved by grace are created in Christ Jesus for good works.¹⁵³ Faith must be shown by works, and a tree is known by its fruit.¹⁵⁴

John's first letter (1 John) presses this same point with unusual force. Grace does not train us toward passivity, nor does Scripture treat righteousness as merely imputed in a way that leaves a person unchanged.¹⁵⁵ John writes, "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him," and then gives the practical test: "the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil." The issue is not whether a person can claim religious identity, make correct confession, or possess doctrinal understanding in theory alone. The issue is whether he is learning to live in a pattern of conduct consistent with the One he claims to know.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Philippians 2:12–13. Paul does not set God's work and human response against each other. Rather, because God is at work in believers "both to will and to work for His good pleasure," believers are commanded to "work out" their salvation with fear and trembling. God's work therefore enables and directs faithful participation; it does not replace it with passivity.

¹⁵³ Ephesians 2:8–10. Paul plainly excludes boasting by teaching that salvation is by grace through faith, "not as a result of works." Yet he immediately adds that believers are God's workmanship, "created in Christ Jesus for good works," which God prepared beforehand so that they would walk in them. Grace therefore excludes self-salvation, but not obedient conduct or the good works that belong to those who are God's workmanship in Christ.

¹⁵⁴ James 2:14–26; Matthew 7:16–23; Luke 6:43–46. James says that faith without works is dead, while Jesus teaches that trees are known by their fruit and warns that not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom, but the one who does the will of His Father. These passages do not teach salvation by self-directed works, but they do show that living faith and true discipleship must bear fruit in conduct.

¹⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. Paul's statement that God made Christ, who knew no sin, "to be sin on our behalf" should not be isolated from the surrounding context of new creation, reconciliation, and ambassadorial participation. Whatever else may be said about imputation or atonement, Paul says the purpose is "so that we might **become** the righteousness of God in Him." Paul does not say Christ was made sin on our behalf so that we might remain forgiven but unchanged; he says this was so that we might **become** the righteousness of God in Him. The language of **becoming** should therefore not be reduced to a merely unchanged legal status, especially when the same passage says that anyone in Christ is a new creature and that reconciled people are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

¹⁵⁶ 1 John 3:6–8. John's language should not be softened into permission for "occasional" sin, as though sin becomes tolerable so long as it is not one's settled way of life. Earlier in the same letter, John writes, "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin," and only then adds that "if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1; see also 1 John 1:8–10). The Advocate is given not so believers may become comfortable with failure, but so that failure need not become final, habitual, or endlessly repeated among

This point brings us to a major transition in the explanation. If understanding alone is not enough, then the Christian life must involve something deeper than remorse or confession. It must involve the formation of character that will not only say “Lord,” but also do what the Lord says.¹⁵⁷ A person of godly character must become the kind of person who can and will faithfully live under God’s authority, not merely confess that God possesses or deserves that authority.¹⁵⁸

This is why suffering, endurance, and tested faith matter so much. As Romans says, suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope that does not disappoint.¹⁵⁹ That is not incidental to discipleship. It is part of what true discipleship entails. Godly hope is not wishful thinking; it is confidence formed through endurance, proven character, and trust in the God who still calls, trains, sends, and saves. Faith gives assurance concerning what is still hoped for and unseen; hope reaches toward what is not yet in hand, and perseverance continues faithfully while we wait for what God has promised.

those who repent, receive cleansing, and continue toward holiness. In 1 John 3:6–8, John contrasts abiding in Christ with the practice of sin, but this contrast should never be turned into an excuse for lesser or intermittent disobedience. The one who abides in Christ is being trained away from sin and toward practiced righteousness. John’s point is especially important here because righteousness is described in lived terms: “the one who practices righteousness is righteous.” Whatever else may be said about imputation, John does not allow righteousness to be severed from transformed conduct.

¹⁵⁷ Luke 6:46. Jesus rejects the separation of confession from obedience. Calling Him “Lord” without doing what He says exposes the insufficiency of verbal allegiance alone.

¹⁵⁸ Philippians 2:12–13. Paul joins God’s work and human response rather than separating them. Believers are told to “work out” their salvation because God is at work in them “both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (NASB). The KJV renders the same idea memorably: God works in us “both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” This supports the point that faithful character requires both willingness and practiced obedience under God’s enabling work.

¹⁵⁹ Romans 5:3–5; Hebrews 11:1; Romans 8:24–25; Psalm 126:5–6. Suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope that does not disappoint. In the larger biblical pattern, proven character must also be ordered toward godliness, so that endurance does not merely make a person stronger, but more faithful under God. Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” while Romans says that hope which is seen is not hope, since no one hopes for what he already sees. If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with perseverance. Psalm 126 likewise pictures those who sow in tears later reaping with joyful shouting. The tears are not outside the sowing; they are part of the costly faithfulness by which God may bring later harvest and joy. Together, these passages show that Christian hope is not possession already in hand, nor wishful thinking detached from obedience, but persevering confidence in God while the promised harvest is still unseen.

At this point, it becomes easier to see why Jesus' life cannot be reduced to an example to admire, or a payment made on someone else's behalf. He does not merely reveal truths for passive observation or theological description. He calls disciples into a path they must learn to walk faithfully over time. He teaches them to submit to God's will over their own. He forms them by command, correction, example, trial, and testing. Jesus does not merely say, "Understand Me," or "Accept Me." He says, "Follow Me." The difference is crucial: true understanding must become lived practice.

That is why understanding alone is not enough. It is necessary, but not sufficient. It is a beginning, not the end. Mere intellectual belief that God exists, or even verbal confession that Jesus is Lord without actually doing what He says¹⁶⁰ will not produce the holiness to which we are called in conduct, allegiance, and *agape* love.¹⁶¹ Even extraordinary understanding and great faith do not fulfill God's true aim if *agape* love is absent.¹⁶²

So the issue before us is not merely whether we can understand the truth more clearly. That matters greatly, but clearer understanding only heightens our responsibility. The deeper question is whether we will receive that truth with humility, submit to it, practice it, endure in it to the end, and allow it to reshape our hearts, minds, and conduct.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Romans 10:9; Luke 6:46. Scripture does call us to confess Jesus as Lord, but Jesus Himself asks, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" Confession of lordship is therefore not meant to remain verbal only; it should express allegiance that learns to obey the Lord who is confessed.

¹⁶¹ Hebrews 11:6; 1 Peter 1:15–16. Mere belief without holy conduct is not the goal God is after.

¹⁶² 1 Corinthians 13:2. Extraordinary understanding or faith is nothing if love is absent.

¹⁶³ Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Ephesians 4:23; James 1:22; 1 Peter 1:15–16. Truth must reshape mind, thoughts, and conduct. Believers are to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, take every thought captive, be renewed in the spirit of the mind, become doers of the word and not hearers only, and be holy in all their conduct because the One who called them is holy.

Step 8 — Wisdom, Character, and *Agape* Love

Basic wisdom requires character to apply understanding for one's own good; agape love requires character ordered toward godliness to apply understanding for the good of others, often at cost to oneself.

If understanding alone is not enough, then we need a way to speak about understanding that has been put into practice. That is where wisdom becomes especially important. Wisdom is not merely the possession of insight, but its application. A person may know many things and still remain foolish if that knowledge is never actually lived out.¹⁶⁴

This is why Scripture speaks so highly of wisdom. Wisdom is not treated as theory or understanding alone. It is meant to guide life. The wise person is not merely someone who can explain a proverb, but someone who applies understanding in a practical and faithful way.

Adam and Eve did not merely misunderstand God's command; they acted against it in a self-willed way. Jesus, by contrast, does not merely describe the Father's will; He obeys it. Disciples are not merely taught what Christ said; they are taught to observe all that He commanded.¹⁶⁵ This means discipleship is not passive reception of information, but a God-directed process of learning, practice, correction, and obedience under Christ. Likewise, wisdom involves understanding put to use—whether in a basic and potentially self-serving way, or in the godly wisdom that comes from above.

Our journey toward godliness is set in motion when we first commit ourselves to God in repentance, faith, and baptism. But more mature godliness gradually appears as the qualities named in 2 Peter 1:5–8—faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, and perseverance—are no longer merely in their infancy, but have become

¹⁶⁴ Proverbs 26:7. This proverb does not deny the value or truth of wisdom itself, but warns that wisdom in the mouth of a fool may be functionally useless when it is not joined to the character needed to walk according to it. This fits the present argument: understanding, instruction, and even true sayings do not accomplish their proper end unless they become rightly practiced.

¹⁶⁵ Matthew 28:19–20. The Great Commission does not end with proclamation alone, but with making disciples and “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Jesus’ command therefore requires more than communicating information; it includes training and forming people who learn, practice, and grow into living out His commands.

increasingly mature in God's ways and increasingly available for outward service, even at cost. Just as basic wisdom requires character to apply understanding for one's own good, godly wisdom requires more mature character, in line with God's example and will, in order to move beyond the self toward unselfish kindness and *agape* love, for the good of us all.

If wisdom, at its most basic level, is understanding applied, then, for working purposes, it may be defined as the application of understanding for one's own benefit. This fits passages such as: "If you are wise, you are wise for yourself"; "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul"; and "Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself."¹⁶⁶

Basic wisdom is understanding applied for one's own good; character is what makes that wisdom practicable, consistent, and effective in conduct.

Scripture also gives sobering examples of wisdom that did not mature into faithful character. Solomon was given extraordinary wisdom, yet his heart was later turned away from God. Wisdom enabled him to judge, build, govern, write, and perceive much about life under the sun, but wisdom did not make obedience automatic.

Lucifer's fall gives an even more severe warning: exalted status, beauty, knowledge, and power do not secure humility before God. Wisdom can recognize benefit, order, and consequence, but when severed from humility, self-control, endurance, and love, it may still be bent toward self-exaltation. This is why wisdom must not remain merely self-benefiting. It must mature with character into the godly wisdom from above, and ultimately into *agape* love.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Proverbs 9:12; Proverbs 19:8; Job 22:2; see also Proverbs 3:13–18; 4:5–9. These passages show that wisdom may rightly be described as profitable to the one who possesses it. "If you are wise, you are wise for yourself"; "He who gets wisdom loves his own soul"; and "Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself." This does not reduce all wisdom to selfishness, but it does show that Scripture can speak of wisdom as understanding applied in a way that benefits the wise person himself.

¹⁶⁷ 1 Kings 3:9–12; 4:29–34; 11:1–10; Ezekiel 28:12–17; Isaiah 14:12–14; 1 Timothy 3:6. Solomon was given extraordinary wisdom, breadth of mind, and understanding, yet later turned away from wholehearted obedience to God. Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14 speak directly against earthly rulers, but their language of exalted beauty, wisdom, pride, and attempted self-exaltation has long been read as also reflecting the deeper pattern of satanic rebellion. Paul likewise warns against conceit, lest one fall into "the condemnation incurred by the devil." Together these examples show that wisdom, rank, beauty, knowledge, or gifting do not make faithful character automatic. Here, faithful character means character rightly ordered under God—humility, obedience, self-control, endurance, and *agape* love directed toward what is good in His sight.

Wisdom is not necessarily selfish. In its most basic form, however, wisdom may be understood as the first level of applied understanding that ordinary human beings—or even an exalted being such as Lucifer—might attain.¹⁶⁸ Loving oneself is not wrong when properly ordered—especially when love for self is governed by love for neighbor, and above all by love for God.¹⁶⁹

Even basic wisdom that is not worldly may therefore be understood as rightly ordered self-love. It applies understanding in ways that preserve, guide, correct, and benefit one's own life, though it can easily be misdirected into selfishness. The person who embraces godly wisdom may love himself, but only in proper order, according to God's ways: loving God first, and neighbor as oneself.

A person cannot consistently apply understanding, even for his own good, without developing traits such as knowledge, self-control, and perseverance. That is one reason wisdom requires the character qualities described in 2 Peter 1:5–11.

Clearly, wisdom is not the principal thing in the fullest sense of Christian maturity.¹⁷⁰ It is a useful building block because its value can be understood intuitively and learned even by the ungodly. A person may become skilled at pursuing what is wisely advantageous while still remaining centered on himself. That is why wisdom alone cannot be the ultimate goal, though it can become a stepping stone toward Christian maturity when pursued under God's direction.

Again, there is wisdom from above, but there is also worldly, self-serving wisdom characterized by envy, selfish ambition, and earthly-minded striving.¹⁷¹ That means

¹⁶⁸ Ezekiel 28:12–17; Isaiah 14:12–14; 1 Timothy 3:6. Ezekiel 28 and Isaiah 14 speak directly against earthly rulers, but their language of exalted beauty, wisdom, pride, and attempted self-exaltation has long been read as also reflecting the deeper pattern of satanic rebellion. Paul likewise warns against conceit, lest one fall into “the condemnation incurred by the devil.” For the present argument, the important point is that wisdom, beauty, rank, or power do not necessarily result in humility, obedience, or faithful character before God.

¹⁶⁹ Mark 12:29–31. Jesus identifies love for God as the foremost commandment and love for neighbor as oneself as the second.

¹⁷⁰ Proverbs 4:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13–14. Proverbs commends wisdom in the strongest terms, even calling it “the principal thing,” because wisdom must be sought, received, and practiced if life is to be lived well. Yet the fuller biblical witness does not treat wisdom by itself as the final summit of maturity. Even Ecclesiastes, with its many observations about life “under the sun,” ends by returning the reader to the fear of God and obedience to His commandments. Wisdom is therefore indispensable, but it must be ordered under God, joined to tested character, and matured toward agape love.

¹⁷¹ James 3:13–17. Scripture distinguishes wisdom from above from selfish, earthly wisdom.

not every application of understanding is desirable in God's eyes. Basic wisdom must be further developed under God's direction into unselfish and godly wisdom. It must not merely succeed on its own terms, or on any terms other than God's. It must learn to serve the good as God defines it.

That is where Jesus again becomes central. He is certainly wise, even embodying godly wisdom, but He also demonstrates the higher fulfillment toward which godly wisdom points: *agape* love in its greatest form. He applied understanding for the good of the Father and for the good of us all, even at immense personal cost. That is why Christ is not only an example of wise living, but of something higher: the willing gift of Himself in obedient *agape* love, which we too are called to emulate as His disciples, including by taking up our own crosses and, when warranted, even laying down our lives for the brethren.¹⁷²

Wisdom should be recognized as a step toward maturity. It requires knowledge, understanding, and the character needed to make wisdom active and effective. But its work remains preparatory unless wisdom further develops into godliness, brotherly kindness, and the truly principal thing: *agape* love toward God first, and toward our neighbor as ourselves.

Notice the similarity and the contrast in these proposed working definitions:

- 1) Wisdom: the application of understanding for one's own good
- 2) *Agape*: the application of understanding for the good of others, even at cost to self

The Introduction's warning against both self-directed striving and passive spiritual automation now becomes especially important. Wisdom does not become character merely because it is understood, and *agape* love does not become mature merely because it is comprehended. God's guidance, strengthening, and correction by the Spirit do not bypass self-control, self-denial, obedience, and practice. Jesus Himself models obedience not as weakness, passivity, or lack of capacity, but as the faithful refusal of independent self-direction; His disciples should not expect maturity to be formed in them by passive nurture alone.

With that guardrail in place, the contrast can be stated more fully. Wisdom applies understanding for one's own good; *agape* love applies understanding in a still

¹⁷² Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23; 1 John 3:16. Discipleship includes self-denial, cross-bearing, and, when required, self-giving for others.

higher way, seeking the good of another even when the cost is real. Basic wisdom teaches a person to apply understanding for his own benefit, and that is good as far as it goes. It is good to choose what leads toward benefit. It is good to learn restraint, prudence, self-control, and, in the case of godly wisdom, faithful living under God. But Scripture does not call us only to wisdom. It calls us toward *agape* love.

The Prologue's earlier point about how compromise weakens while refusing compromise strengthens now becomes especially important. Compromise does not merely reveal weakness; it reinforces it. In contrast, the faithful refusal to compromise strengthens character, until compromise can gradually become "out of the question" and lose much of its attractive power. This is why character cannot be treated as an embellishment or as optional. In Scripture, what is faithfully exercised is strengthened, and what is neglected or surrendered may be diminished.¹⁷³ If wisdom requires applied understanding, and if *agape* love requires doing good for others even at real cost, then repeated faithful self-control and self-denial help form the kind of character needed to discipline even our own bodies, master sin rather than be mastered by it, and follow Christ into the costly love that may even require laying down our lives for the brethren.¹⁷⁴

This brings the contrast between wisdom and *agape* love into sharper focus. Wisdom may help a person preserve his own life, govern his conduct prudently, and avoid folly. But *agape* love moves beyond the self in a way that basic or even godly wisdom does not necessarily embody. *Agape* love may be understood as the application of understanding for the benefit of another; because of that, it often

¹⁷³ Jesus teaches that faithfulness in little is connected with faithfulness in much. See Luke 16:10. He also warns that to the one who has, more will be given, while from the one who does not have, even what he has may be taken away. See Matthew 13:12; 25:29; Luke 8:18; 19:26. This should not be reduced to material prosperity, nor treated as arbitrary reward and punishment. It also reflects a formative reality: what is faithfully received and exercised can grow, while what is neglected, buried, or surrendered can diminish. In this sense, repeated compromise and repeated faithfulness both create momentum, but in opposite directions.

¹⁷⁴ Genesis 4:7 presents sin as crouching at the door, desiring Cain, yet Cain is told that he must master it. Paul likewise describes disciplined self-control in bodily terms: "I discipline my body and make it my slave." See 1 Corinthians 9:27. Jesus describes discipleship as self-denial and cross-bearing. See Luke 9:23; Matthew 16:24. John gives costly *agape* love its concrete form: because Christ laid down His life for us, "we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." See 1 John 3:16. These passages do not teach self-salvation by works; they show that God's call to righteousness includes meaningful human response, disciplined resistance to sin, self-denial, and costly love.

involves real cost. Wisdom may teach a man how to anticipate problems so as to protect or prosper himself, whereas *agape* love may call him to lay his own life down for another.

This is also why the progression in 2 Peter 1 is so important. Peter does not stop with faith alone, but moves to virtue, knowledge, self-control, and perseverance. These qualities strengthen the believer's capacity to act faithfully and consistently. Yet Peter does not move immediately from perseverance to brotherly kindness or *agape* love. He places godliness between them. That placement matters. Godliness is not merely the possession of stronger character, nor is it a later opportunity to reconsider the allegiance already given to God. Rather, mature godliness appears as faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, and perseverance become increasingly ordered under God's authority and increasingly available for outward service, even at cost.¹⁷⁵

The sequence then moves through brotherly kindness and reaches its summit in *agape* love.¹⁷⁶ That progression is deeply meaningful. Character gives consistency; godliness directs that consistency under God's good ways and purposes; and kindness and *agape* love show the outward direction in which godly character must mature. Knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and consistent character can increase a person's capacity, but godliness keeps that capacity from becoming just more effective moral self-rule. In that sense, godliness does not weaken developed strength; it orders strength toward God, so that it may move beyond the self toward brotherly kindness and *agape* love.

This also helps explain why *agape* love cannot be reduced to affection, or to the enjoyment we receive from the brotherly love often associated with *phileo*. The calling toward mature *agape* love goes beyond receiving what is good; it calls us to

¹⁷⁵ Ephesians 6:10; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Paul tells believers to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might,” which should not be reduced either to passive weakness or to autonomous self-strengthening. Likewise, Paul's statement that Christ's power is perfected in weakness does not make weakness itself the goal, nor does it cancel the call to diligence, self-control, endurance, and maturity. Rather, it excludes boastful self-sufficiency and teaches dependence upon God's strength. Peter's progression likewise calls believers to active growth, but places godliness before brotherly kindness and *agape* love, showing that developed capacity must be ordered toward God if it is to become stable, fruitful, and available for His outward purposes.

¹⁷⁶ 2 Peter 1:5–7. Peter's progression supports the ascent from faith toward *agape* love.

the active giving and doing of good for another, even when costly to us. Such *agape* love is not necessarily accompanied by pleasant feelings.

That is why Jesus says, “Greater [*agape*] love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”¹⁷⁷ He does not define this highest form of love in terms of emotional warmth, but in terms of costly self-giving. This does not mean every act of *agape* love must involve dramatic suffering, but it does mean *agape* love is measured by the willingness to give for another’s good in spite of the cost.¹⁷⁸

A gift may be received, but it may also be given. This distinction matters. God does not merely intend that we should receive His kindness and *agape* love as passive beneficiaries; He intends that we should become willing givers of kindness and *agape* love ourselves. Costly love cannot simply be programmed into us without bypassing the very will through which love must be chosen. God therefore does not cause mature *agape* love to proceed from us by spiritual remote control, apart from our own participation and choice. Scripture says that God loves a cheerful giver, not one who gives under compulsion or necessity.¹⁷⁹

If we are to become like Christ and like our Father, then the love first shown to us must become love we also choose to give—willingly, cheerfully, and for another’s good, even when the cost is real.

This is not because God lacks anything from us, but because His rightly ordered household flourishes when His goodness is received, embodied, returned, and shared for the good of all. This also helps explain why “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” Reverent deference to God may seem costly in the short run, but it does not place us at an ultimate disadvantage, because God’s glory and goodness overflow for the good of His entire household. When we fulfill God’s purposes and seek the good of others—God first, then our neighbors as

¹⁷⁷ John 15:13. Jesus defines greater love in terms of laying down one’s life.

¹⁷⁸ 1 John 4:19. Love’s action is grounded in prior divine love, but is not reduced to mere sentiment.

¹⁷⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:7 says that each one should give “not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Although Paul is speaking there of material generosity, the principle accords with the broader pattern of Christian development. God does not seek programmed or compulsory compliance, but willing participation in what is good. This also accords with Christ’s own example: He was not forced unwillingly to lay down His life, but said, “No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative” (John 10:18). See also John 15:13; 1 John 3:16; Philippians 2:5–8; and 2 Peter 1:5–7.

ourselves—we share in the overflowing good He intends for the whole household, including ourselves.¹⁸⁰

God is not seeking programmed compliance. He is developing sons and daughters who willingly, cheerfully, and faithfully give what is good—especially *agape* love—sometimes even at great cost.

This also clarifies why *agape* love should not be confused with fondness, affection, or simply “liking” someone more. We may be commanded to love even our enemies with *agape* love, not because we find them pleasing, but because *agape* love seeks and does what is good in God’s sight for others even where affection may be absent, even at cost to ourselves, and even when repayment is unlikely. In this sense, *agape* love does not necessarily involve sentiment at all. When rightly ordered under God, *agape* love becomes a gift that requires formed strength: providing assistance or relief, doing good rather than returning evil, showing mercy rather than answering hostility in kind, and refusing to close the door that God, in His mercy, may still be holding open for repentance.¹⁸¹

This pattern is not merely commanded by Jesus; it is embodied in Jesus. He laid down His life, bore suffering, and endured shame, despising that shame for the joy

¹⁸⁰ This helps explain why Scripture says that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” See Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 111:10. At the most basic level, fear of consequences may restrain foolish conduct, but the fear of the LORD should mature beyond mere apprehension into reverent trust, practiced obedience, and the good understanding that comes through keeping His commandments. If wisdom includes applied understanding for one’s own good, then reverent deference to God is not ultimately self-disadvantaging, even when obedience is costly in the short run. Rightly ordered fear, trust, obedience, and love toward God are the beginning of godly wisdom, which can mature further toward kindness and costly *agape* love—for the good of us all.

¹⁸¹ Jesus’ commands to love enemies, pray for persecutors, do good, and be merciful as the Father is merciful show that *agape* love is not reducible to affection or emotional warmth. See Matthew 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36. One may seek and do another’s good without finding that person pleasing, safe, agreeable, or worthy of trust. Brotherly kindness and *agape* love are related, but not identical; in 2 Peter 1:5–7, brotherly kindness precedes *agape* love, suggesting a meaningful distinction within the progression, with *agape* love reaching beyond brotherly concerns toward the more costly seeking and doing of good for others, even enemies. Romans 2:4 says that “the kindness of God leads you to repentance,” but Paul immediately frames this against stubbornness and an unrepentant heart. Both kindness and *agape* love can serve God’s redemptive purpose and lead toward repentance, while the hearer or recipient remains responsible for the response.

set before Him. *Agape* love is therefore truly the principal thing,¹⁸² for “the one who does not love [*agape*] does not know God, for God is love.”¹⁸³

Similarly, John teaches that the hope of future likeness to Christ should deepen the pursuit of present purification, not weaken it. Believers are already called “children of God,” yet John says “it has not appeared as yet what we will be.” The promise is astonishing: “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” But John immediately adds, “And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” Future likeness is therefore not an excuse for present passivity. The hope of being made like Christ summons believers to pursue purity and mature character now.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Proverbs rightly calls wisdom “the principal thing” within the context of wisdom instruction, where wisdom is indispensable for life, discernment, and faithful conduct. Yet the fuller biblical witness shows that wisdom alone is not the highest fulfillment of godly maturity. Solomon himself was given extraordinary wisdom, breadth of mind, and understanding, yet later turned away from wholehearted obedience to God (1 Kings 3:9–12; 4:29–34; 11:1–10). His life therefore illustrates both the great value of wisdom and its limitation when not joined to enduring faithfulness, rightly ordered character, and love. Ecclesiastes likewise concludes not with wisdom as the final end, but with fearing God and keeping His commandments, because God will bring every act to judgment (Eccl. 12:13–14). In that fuller canonical context, *agape* love may rightly be called “truly the principal thing,” because it is the mature fulfillment toward which rightly ordered wisdom, character, godliness, and brotherly kindness should lead.

¹⁸³ 1 John 4:8. John’s statement that “God is love” should be received with full seriousness, but it should not be pressed into an abstraction that overtakes the living God Himself. God is love, but “love” is not a higher authority above God by which His commands, judgments, or character may be corrected. Nor is God an impersonal principle or a separate entity called “love,” rather than a real, personal being. He is the living God, the Father who sent His Son, and the One whose own character, will, holiness, righteousness, authority, and truth define what love truly is. In context, John is speaking of the love revealed by God in sending His Son, and of the love that must therefore be practiced by those who know God (1 John 4:7–11). Human beings may not define love on their own terms and then judge God by that definition, but *agape* love must be understood from God’s own character, will, and actions. Since God is love, those who claim to know Him must learn to walk in the kind of love He Himself defines and models.

¹⁸⁴ 1 John 3:1–3, 9; Matthew 5:48. John’s statement that believers “will be like Him” should not be read as though future transformation makes present character formation unnecessary, or as though character matters only during this present earthly life. John draws the opposite conclusion: “everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” This strengthens rather than weakens Christ’s command: “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Our future glorification does not make character unnecessary; it calls us to pursue purity and mature character now, so that such character is carried forward into the life of God’s kingdom. Likewise, John’s later statement in verse 9 that one born of God “cannot sin” should not be pressed into the conclusion that glorified sons become effortlessly perfect, morally automatic, or unable to sin in the same unique sense as the Father. We are called to

This also clarifies why character should not be treated as a temporary necessity that becomes irrelevant once God's children are fully transformed. Some may assume that if the everlasting kingdom of God is free from sin, then no wayward possibility or contemplation will ever present itself to the mind of one who belongs to God. But Scripture does not require that conclusion. Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Temptation itself, therefore, is not the same as sin; nevertheless, we must deny ourselves whenever our own preferences diverge from God's will.

The crucial distinction is between a possible departure from God's will being presented to the mind and the heart's inward consent to that departure. James distinguishes temptation from sin while showing that desire, once conceived, gives birth to sin. Jesus likewise warns that inward consent to evil is a moral offense even before outward conduct occurs. The point is not that every tempting thought is already rebellion, but that desire embraced or intended against God's will reveals rebellion in the heart and mind before it is exposed and confirmed by action.¹⁸⁵

This distinction matters for how we understand maturity. God's purpose is not merely to produce beings who are unable to imagine any alternative to His will, as though holiness were a kind of spiritual automation. Even in Eden, before the forbidden fruit was actually eaten, the forbidden tree was first contemplated, revalued, and then intended to be eaten against God's command. Rather than producing mechanical obedience, God is developing sons and daughters who are trustworthy because their character has been trained, strengthened, tested, and approved. Paul's progression from tribulation to perseverance, from perseverance to proven character, and from proven character to hope shows that tested and

follow Christ's example of faithful obedience, perfectly ordered under the Father's will and expressed in obedience to the commands of Christ Himself.

¹⁸⁵ Hebrews 4:15; James 1:14–15; Matthew 5:27–28. Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin, which shows that temptation itself is not sin. James distinguishes temptation from sin while showing that desire, once conceived, gives birth to sin. Jesus' warning about adultery in the heart likewise shows that inward consent to evil is already a moral offense before the outward act occurs. The point is not that every tempting thought is itself rebellion, but that desire embraced or intended against God's will reveals inward rebellion before it is exposed in outward conduct.

proven character is not incidental to God's purpose. It is part of the pathway by which faithful persons are developed for hope that will not disappoint.¹⁸⁶

Entering God's kingdom therefore does not make character unnecessary; it reveals what fully developed, fully trustworthy character is for. Self-control, self-denial, and faithful obedience are not merely emergency tools for mortal weakness. They belong to the kind of developed and proven character God can entrust with life, freedom, authority, and inheritance in His everlasting kingdom.¹⁸⁷

Jesus Himself is the model. His obedience was not effortless. In Gethsemane He did not treat the path before Him as painless or personally preferred, but He still yielded Himself to the Father: "not My will, but Yours be done." If the faithful Son obeyed through real self-denial, then those who follow Him should not imagine that character is needed only for this present age. Character is part of becoming trustworthy sons and daughters whose will remains faithfully aligned with God's will, and who are prepared to contribute faithfully to the welfare of His household.

Having clarified that future transformation does not make character unnecessary, we may return to the central priority toward which godly character must mature. Paul states the priority of *agape* love with striking clarity: even if one understands

¹⁸⁶ Genesis 3:6; Romans 5:3–5; 2 Peter 1:5–11; Hebrews 5:14; 1 John 3:1–3; Luke 22:42. Genesis 3:6 shows that before the forbidden fruit was eaten, the tree had already been revalued as "good," "a delight," and "desirable." Paul says that tribulation brings about perseverance, perseverance brings about "proven character," and proven character brings about hope. Peter likewise calls believers to supply moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and agape love, warning that without such qualities a person is blind or shortsighted. Hebrews describes maturity as the result of senses trained by practice, and John says that everyone who has the hope of becoming like Christ purifies himself. In Gethsemane, Jesus' "not My will, but Yours be done" shows real self-denying obedience, not mechanical compliance. These passages support the conclusion that character is not a dispensable feature of this life only, but part of God's purpose in developing trustworthy sons and daughters who, as members of His household, can be entrusted to contribute faithfully to its welfare, rather than remain passive recipients of its blessings.

¹⁸⁷ Romans 5:3–5; Luke 16:10; Matthew 25:21; 1 Corinthians 4:2. Paul says that tribulation brings about perseverance, perseverance brings about "proven character," and proven character brings about hope. Jesus teaches that the one faithful in very little is faithful also in much, and in the parable of the talents the faithful servant is entrusted with more: "You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things." Paul likewise says that stewards must be found trustworthy. These passages support the point that God's purpose is not merely to excuse or overlook weakness, but to develop faithful and proven sons and daughters who can be trusted with greater responsibility.

all mysteries and all knowledge, and has all faith so as to remove mountains, but does not have love, he is nothing. That is why *agape* love cannot be treated as a secondary ornament of Christian maturity. It is central.¹⁸⁸

So the upward movement is not difficult to see. Understanding must become wisdom. Wisdom must be made real through character. Character must mature into godliness, brotherly kindness, and *agape* love. And *agape* love, unlike self-preserving wisdom, gives. It seeks the good of God and others, often at real cost. That is why wisdom may preserve, but *agape* love gives.

If *agape* love is the higher fulfillment of understanding, wisdom, and character, then it cannot remain only a private virtue. It must become lived-out obedience to the Great Commission.

¹⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:2. Even extraordinary understanding or faith is nothing without love.

Step 9 — The Great Commission as Outward Expression of Mature Discipleship

Jesus does not say merely, “Tell the nations what I have done.” He says, “Make disciples.”

If *agape* love is the higher fulfillment of understanding, wisdom, and character, then it cannot remain only a private virtue. It must become lived-out obedience to the Great Commission.

If the whole arc of this explanation is sound, then the Great Commission cannot be treated as an appendix to the gospel, nor as bonus points for especially energetic Christians. It is the outward culmination of the whole matter.

The Great Commission is not a task God assigned because He could not convey His message without our help, but because His purpose includes more fully developing faithful servants through our own participation. We need to learn to receive, embody, and give onward what He has entrusted to us. The mission therefore serves not only those who hear, but also those who are sent: it calls disciples to become more faithful, more courageous, more mature, and more practiced in the very truth they are commanded to teach. In this way, the Great Commission is not merely an outward assignment; it is also part of God’s way of developing the kind of people who can faithfully represent His will, His ways, and His *agape* love.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Paul tells Timothy to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB 1995), while the KJV renders the same phrase, “exercise thyself rather unto godliness,” and the NKJV similarly says, “exercise yourself toward godliness.” See 1 Timothy 4:7–8. The Great Commission should be understood in that light: not as a task God assigns because He is unable to act without human help, but as part of the disciplined training by which His children steadily learn to receive, embody, and give what is good. Jesus’ statement that if His disciples became silent, “the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40), also shows that God is not dependent on human voices in an absolute sense. Such participation does not complete God as though He lacked anything; rather, it pleases the Father and Christ because it helps develop faithful servants who can fulfill and live out God’s will, His ways, and His *agape* love—for the good of us all.

Christ's commission is not merely to make converts who profess belief, but to form disciples who learn to do what He commanded.¹⁹⁰ The command is to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,¹⁹¹ and teaching them to observe all that He commanded.¹⁹²

If mankind's problem began in moral self-rule, if Christ reverses that rebellion through obedient sonship, and if understanding must mature into wisdom, character, and *agape* love, then the final outward calling of reconciled humanity cannot be merely to possess these things inwardly. It must be to help call others into that same path.

This is why Jesus does not merely command proclamation in the bare sense of spreading information. He says, "Make disciples of all the nations ... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."¹⁹³ That command is deeply significant. Jesus does not describe the mission of His followers as the mere transfer of facts, nor as the securing of verbal professions alone. He commands a mission of formation: making disciples and teaching them to observe all that He commanded.¹⁹⁴ Nor is

¹⁹⁰ Philippians 2:12–13. Paul joins human response and divine working: believers are to "work out" their salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work in them "both to will and to work for His good pleasure." This supports the point that Christian faith is not passive belief alone, but God-directed participation in willing and doing what pleases Him.

¹⁹¹ Matthew 28:18–20; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–15; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. The naming of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Matthew 28:19 should be read within the ordered commission of Matthew 28:18–20, where all authority has been given to the Son, and the Son commands His disciples to make disciples and teach them to observe all that He commanded. This wording should not be isolated from the broader biblical pattern in which the Father gives authority, the Son commands and is shown elsewhere to send the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit teaches, reminds, guides, and bears witness. The present work does not attempt a full treatment of the Holy Spirit, but Matthew 28:19 should not be used as a shortcut that cancels the ordered pattern of authority, mission, and obedience emphasized throughout this manuscript.

¹⁹² Matthew 28:18–20. Jesus' commission is not merely to gather professions of belief, but to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to observe all that He commanded. The mission therefore aims at obedient discipleship, not bare religious identification.

¹⁹³ Matthew 28:19–20. The Great Commission commands disciple-making and teaching obedience, not bare information transfer.

¹⁹⁴ Jesus likewise ties truth to abiding and discipleship, not to mere exposure to correct information: "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31–32). In context, the truth that makes one free is bound up with continuing in Christ's word and being His true disciples. This is therefore consistent with the Great Commission's emphasis not on bare proclamation alone, but on the formation of disciples who are taught to observe what He commanded.

this formation merely verbal, for disciples are taught not only by words, but also by example, conduct, and visible fruit.¹⁹⁵

This outward mission should not be limited to those with formal office or public platform. Not every believer is called to serve as a pastor, elder, or public teacher in the same way. Yet neither does the Great Commission permit disciples to remain perpetual infants, forever receiving and never becoming able to strengthen, instruct, encourage, or help form others in any way. Christ does not command His followers merely to gather hearers, but to make disciples, teaching them to observe all that He commanded. The end of the sequence is therefore not private understanding alone, but formed people who can help form others.¹⁹⁶

And what must be passed on is not pardon alone. The Great Commission includes calling men and women out of moral self-rule and into rightly ordered life under God. It includes repentance. It includes obedience. It includes holy conduct, endurance, and faithfulness. It includes helping others not merely hear the words of Christ, but begin to walk the path of Christ. In that sense, the Great Commission is not simply one more task alongside other Christian concerns. It is the great outward expression of the gospel rightly understood.

This also explains why the Great Commission must not be reduced to proclamation alone. Proclamation matters greatly, of course. People cannot respond rightly to what they have never heard. But the command of Jesus goes further. He does not say merely, “Tell them.” He says, “Make disciples,” and “teach them to observe.” That is why the church’s mission cannot be understood as the communication of information detached from the formation of persons. Christ’s aim is not to produce

¹⁹⁵ This need not imply that, in order to teach, disciples must first be assigned a formal role as “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). Yet the Great Commission still gives Christ’s followers an outward responsibility, and maturing disciples increasingly participate in that work not only through speech, but through conduct, example, obedience, and fruit. A life conformed to Christ is itself a form of instruction, for new disciples are taught not only by what they hear, but also by what they see lived out before them.

¹⁹⁶ Hebrews 5:12–14; Ephesians 4:11–16; Romans 12:4–8; Colossians 3:16; Matthew 28:19–20. This does not collapse all believers into the same formal teaching office or public function. Scripture distinguishes gifts, roles, and responsibilities within the body. Yet the New Testament does not present maturity as optional, nor does it envision discipleship as a permanent condition of receiving without ever becoming able to strengthen, admonish, encourage, or help teach others. The Great Commission therefore does not eliminate ordered roles, but neither does it permit perpetual infancy to be treated as an adequate norm for discipleship.

hearers only, but disciples; not merely listeners, but doers; not merely those who repeat His name, but those who increasingly walk in His ways.¹⁹⁷

This is one reason the Great Commission belongs at the summit of this work rather than near the beginning. The command itself is easier to quote than to understand fully. It is possible to speak often of “making disciples” while having only a thin concept of what a disciple actually is. But if the argument of this explanation is right, then a disciple is not simply someone who has assented to a message, nor someone who has undergone a ritual while remaining inwardly committed to moral self-direction. A disciple is someone who has begun to yield the prerogative of defining good and evil back to God, and who is learning under Jesus to live in obedience, wisdom, endurance, and *agape* love.¹⁹⁸

That is why the Great Commission and the earlier steps of this work are inseparable. If we misunderstand Eden, we will misunderstand repentance. If we misunderstand repentance, we will misunderstand why the Father’s authority matters. If we misunderstand the Father’s authority, we will misunderstand the beauty and magnitude of the Son’s becoming obedient.¹⁹⁹ If we misunderstand the magnitude of His sacrifice in becoming obedient, we will misunderstand the true shape of salvation. And if we misunderstand salvation, we will misunderstand discipleship. In that case, we will almost certainly misunderstand the Great Commission itself.

The Great Commission therefore stands not merely at the end of the explanation, but as its practical culmination. It shows where the whole arc has been moving. God is not merely collecting informed hearers. He is reconciling people from moral autonomy into obedient love, and He calls those who begin to walk that path to help others walk it also. That is why Christians are not only called to become disciples, but also to make disciples.²⁰⁰

This also clarifies why the Great Commission is the highest outward expression of mature discipleship: those being formed as faithful sons and daughters of God are

¹⁹⁷ Luke 6:46. Mere verbal acknowledgment of Jesus’ lordship is exposed if His commands are not done.

¹⁹⁸ A true disciple yields moral self-rule back to God and learns obedient living under Jesus.

¹⁹⁹ The Son’s obedience is central to understanding salvation rightly.

²⁰⁰ John 17:3; Matthew 28:19–20. Eternal life is bound up with rightly knowing the Father and the Son, and that true knowledge leads into Christ’s mission of making disciples and teaching them to observe all that He commanded.

also called to help form others. It is not highest in the sense that it excuses all other concerns, nor because every believer will carry it out in identical ways. It is highest as an outward expression because it gathers into one mission the central concerns of the whole work: repentance from moral self-rule, submission to God's authority, faithful obedience under Christ, growth in wisdom and character, the giving of *agape* love, and the formation of others into that same pattern. It is the outward labor by which the inward work of God is extended into the world.

Put another way, our highest calling is to become faithful offspring of God who mature as His sons and daughters, brethren Christ is not ashamed to acknowledge, conformed to the image and example of Christ—the faithful Son who became obedient to the Father's will and shows us the path out of moral autonomy into the obedient sonship He models. The Great Commission is distinct from this highest calling, but not disconnected from it. It is the outward work entrusted to Christ's disciples: helping others enter that same path of transformation, turning from moral self-rule toward repentance, baptism, and the character-enabled obedience by which disciples learn to observe all that Jesus commanded.²⁰¹

And this mission is not only about others. It is also about ourselves. Those who teach others to observe all that Christ commanded must also learn to observe those commands more faithfully themselves. The Great Commission is therefore not simply something we do after discipleship; it is one of the principal ways discipleship continues to shape and test us. In calling others into the path of Christ, we ourselves are further called to walk it.

This also shows why practical self-help, coaching, and counsel may be useful, but cannot provide the final framework for Christian growth. It is good to identify concrete habits, pressures, weaknesses, responsibilities, and environmental factors that affect conduct. Scripture does not call believers to passive waiting, as though

²⁰¹ Acts 17:28–29; Romans 8:14–23, 29; Hebrews 2:10–12; 1 John 3:1–3; Philippians 2:5–8; John 5:19, 30; Matthew 28:19–20; Titus 2:11–14; 2 Peter 1:5–11. Scripture speaks of human beings as God's offspring, and of believers as those led by the Spirit of God, awaiting the fullness of adoption as sons, conformed to the image of the Son, and brought into glory as brethren Christ is not ashamed to acknowledge. Christ Himself is the pattern of this calling: though He possessed prior glory, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient, refused autonomous initiative, and sought not His own will but the will of the Father who sent Him. The Great Commission is therefore distinct from this highest calling, but not disconnected from it. It is the outward work by which disciples help others enter the same path of repentance, formation, and character-enabled obedience, learning to observe all that Jesus commanded.

growth occurs without learning, practice, correction, endurance, or self-control. Such help may result in a person becoming more disciplined, more productive, more effective, or more successful according to ordinary measures, while still remaining oriented toward self-defined goals detached from God's will. Worse, when the standard of "improvement" is detached from God's ways, the goals themselves can easily shift with personal preference, social pressure, cultural fashion, or every contrarian argument that happens to seem persuasive at the moment. In contrast, Scripture gives discipleship a stable moral center that self-help alone does not and cannot supply. The deeper question is not whether a person is functioning better by material, social, or worldly measures, but whether he is learning to walk faithfully and fruitfully according to what God calls good — even when that learning is uncomfortable, costly, or unimpressive by secular standards. For that reason, the Great Commission is not a call merely to help people improve their lives, but to make disciples who learn to observe all that Christ commanded.²⁰²

Jesus' own words about the harvest sharpen this point. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." The need is not merely for more people who possess religious information, but for workers—people formed in character, willing in heart, and strengthened enough to enter the work of God. The prayer Jesus commands is therefore not fatalistic resignation, but hopeful dependence: "beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest." The Lord of the harvest can send workers, but workers must still be willing to go.²⁰³ The fitting

²⁰² Matthew 7:24–27; Matthew 28:19–20; James 1:5–8; Ephesians 4:11–16; Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Titus 2:11–14; Hebrews 5:14. Jesus says that the wise man is the one who hears His words and acts on them, building on rock rather than sand. The Great Commission likewise commands not merely proclamation, inspiration, or self-improvement, but making disciples and teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded. James warns that the double-minded man is unstable in all his ways, and Paul warns against remaining children who are tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine. God's word is therefore not merely motivational material, but the stable standard by which thought, conduct, correction, training, and discipleship are ordered under God's authority. At the same time, Scripture does not present growth as passive or automatic: grace trains believers to deny ungodliness and live righteously, and maturity involves senses trained by practice. Without God's stable standard, "growth" can become whatever the self, the therapist, the coach, the market, the culture, or the moment happens to prefer; with that standard, practical help can be received and ordered toward faithful discipleship.

²⁰³ Matthew 9:37–38; Isaiah 6:8; Ephesians 6:10. Jesus' command to beseech the Lord of the harvest joins dependence on God with the need for workers. The prayer is not fatalistic

response is therefore not passive admiration, but willing availability: “Here am I. Send me.” The harvest is already before us, and the path has already been laid before our feet; we must become willing volunteers in the work Christ has set before His disciples, ready to be sent where He directs.²⁰⁴

So the end of the matter is not mere proclamation or profession, but becoming disciples and making disciples who observe all that Christ commanded. The mission of the church is not fulfilled when information has been transferred, but when people are being formed into faithful citizens of God’s everlasting kingdom. That is why Jesus does not say merely, “Tell the nations what I have done.” He says, “Make disciples.”

If *agape* love is the highest fulfillment toward which wisdom and character must grow, and if the Great Commission is the highest outward expression of mature discipleship, then its fulfillment requires the kind of people God is forming: persons of character who are willing and able to remain faithful and to give for the good of others, now and forever in His kingdom.

The Great Commission is not a closing slogan, nor a final burst of missionary energy. It is the highest outward expression of our calling because it expresses, in active form, the very thing God is doing: gathering, forming, and preparing a people who can live under His rule in holiness, unity, endurance, and *agape* love. It is therefore not a side task, but a kingdom task; not a marginal concern, but a central one requiring spiritual development that leads us not only to receive, but also to give ourselves for the good of God and others.²⁰⁵

resignation, as though human participation were irrelevant, but hopeful dependence upon the One who sends and strengthens His servants. Isaiah’s “Here am I. Send me!” should not be flattened into presumption, as though every servant appoints himself to every task; yet neither should it be avoided by passivity. The proper pattern is yielded willingness under God’s authority: God calls, God sends, God strengthens, and His servants answer.

²⁰⁴ Isaiah 6:8; Psalm 110:3; Matthew 9:37–38; Luke 10:2. When the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Isaiah answers, “Here am I. Send me!” Psalm 110:3 likewise says, “Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power.” Jesus teaches that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few, and commands His disciples to beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest. Together, these passages show that God’s mission requires not merely recognition of need, but willing availability and voluntary participation in the work to which He sends His servants.

²⁰⁵ Matthew 10:8; 1 John 3:16; Matthew 28:19–20. Jesus says, “Freely you received, freely give.” John says that because Christ laid down His life for us, “we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” The Great Commission, with its command to make disciples and teach them to

The Conclusion of the Matter

The Kind of People God Is Forming

This, then, is the kind of people God is forming: persons of character who are willing and able to remain faithful and to give for the good of others, now and forever in His kingdom.

This explanation began with a question about Eden, but it does not end there. It ends with a vision of what God is restoring and producing. He is forming people who no longer insist on moral autonomy, but who learn to receive His definitions of good and evil, walk in His righteousness, and live under His authority with understanding, wisdom, endurance, holiness, and *agape* love.

The Father's status as the enduring center of divine authority is not a minor technicality, but a central reality. If that is true, then the Son's obedience is not merely one more fact about Jesus, but one of Scripture's most beautiful revelations of the kind of life mankind must learn to live.

That is why this explanation has pressed beyond information alone. Knowledge matters. Understanding matters. Wisdom matters. Character matters. But none of these reaches its proper end if it stops short of *agape* love. God is not merely gathering hearers, but sons and daughters who can endure, overcome, and give for the good of others while loving and serving Him above all.

In that sense, greatness in God's kingdom is not self-exaltation, but humility with strength in serving God's will. It is not independence from rightful authority, but harmony under it. It is not passive religion proclaiming forgiveness without repentance, but fruit-bearing, enduring, overcoming, and giving the gift of *agape* love according to the Father's will.

This is also why the final exhortation cannot be merely, "Think about these things." The more searching question is whether we will live accordingly. Will we continue to define good and evil by what seems desirable in our own eyes? Or will we yield that prerogative back to God? Will we seek merely to be comfortable, or

observe all that Christ commanded, therefore calls for more than receiving grace, truth, and instruction. It calls disciples to become people through whom what has been received is learned, embodied, and given onward for the good of God and others.

will we strive to become fruitful, seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness?²⁰⁶ Will we remain content with passive religious understanding, or will we become disciples in truth—disciples who increasingly learn to observe what Christ commanded and help call others into that same path?

Our highest calling, then, is not mission detached from spiritual maturity, but mature sonship and daughterhood under the Father, conformed to the faithful Son who became obedient. The Great Commission is the outward work entrusted to such disciples: helping others enter the same path of humility, repentance, baptism, and character-enabled obedience, as they learn to observe all that Jesus commanded.

Paul also gives a beautiful picture of such formed people in Colossians 3:12–17. There we see compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love as the perfect bond of unity, the peace of Christ ruling in the heart, thankfulness, teaching and admonishing, and finally the comprehensive call to do whatever we do “in word or deed” in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.²⁰⁷

If the perspective set forth in these pages is sound, then the implications are not small. But neither is the hope. The God who calls us is not calling us into futility, but into an everlasting kingdom.²⁰⁸ He is not merely exposing the root of mankind’s rebellion; He is providing the remedy in Christ, training through grace, instruction through Scripture, and the hope of a better resurrection.²⁰⁹ He is

²⁰⁶ Matthew 6:33. The emphasis here is not merely on “righteousness” in the abstract, nor on whatever may seem righteous in our own eyes, but on His righteousness—that is, righteousness as defined by the King whose kingdom is being sought. This fits the larger argument of this work: man was never authorized to define good and evil for himself, and therefore true righteousness must be received from God rather than self-defined.

²⁰⁷ Colossians 3:12–17. This passage gathers many of the qualities emphasized throughout this work: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, unity, peace, thankfulness, teaching, admonition, and conduct done “in word or deed” in the name of the Lord Jesus.

²⁰⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Peter 1:10–11; Hebrews 12:28. Paul says that believers should be steadfast and abounding in the work of the Lord, “knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” Peter likewise urges diligence so that “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied.” Hebrews also speaks of receiving “a kingdom which cannot be shaken.” Together these passages show that faithful labor, growth, and endurance are not futile, but are directed toward God’s everlasting kingdom.

²⁰⁹ Romans 5:18–19; Titus 2:11–14; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; Hebrews 11:35. Christ provides the remedy to Adam’s disobedience through His own obedience, whose pattern we are called to follow. Grace does not merely pardon, but instructs and trains believers to deny ungodliness and

forming persons who are both willing and able to remain faithful and to give for the good of others, now and forever in His kingdom.²¹⁰

We do not always know what effect a faithful word,²¹¹ a faithful act, or a faithful example may have once it passes beyond us. Small beginnings can have far-reaching consequences. In that sense, even what may seem modest or inconsequential in our own eyes may, under God's hand, help bring about a much larger chain of good than we can presently see.

Nor does God call us into this path without setting before us a hope worthy of such endurance. We are told to seek the Lord while He may be found,²¹² and to believe not only that He is, but that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.²¹³ Scripture says that in His presence is fullness of joy, and in His right hand are pleasures forevermore.²¹⁴ Indeed, eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him. Psalm 91 likewise pictures the one who has set his love upon God, known His name, and called upon Him; God answers, remains with him in trouble, delivers and honors him, satisfies him, and finally shows him His salvation.²¹⁵

live righteously. Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. And Hebrews speaks of faithful sufferers who endured in hope of "a better resurrection." Together these passages show that God's remedy is not mere exposure of rebellion, but the formation, instruction, endurance, and hope by which He prepares people in Christ for His kingdom.

²¹⁰ Psalm 127:4–5. The psalm describes children as arrows in the hand of a warrior and says they "will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate." In its immediate setting, this concerns children as a blessing to a household. Yet the image fits the larger biblical pattern developed here: God is forming sons who are not merely sheltered recipients, but faithful representatives able to stand in the place of conflict, speak without shame, and uphold what belongs to their Father.

²¹¹ Proverbs 25:11. The KJV memorably says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." The NASB renders the idea, "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances." A faithful word may seem small when spoken, but Scripture recognizes the fitting word as beautiful, timely, and valuable. Such words may bear fruit beyond what the speaker can immediately see.

²¹² Isaiah 55:6. "Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near."

²¹³ Hebrews 11:6. God is said to be "a rewarder of those who seek Him."

²¹⁴ Psalm 16:11. "In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

²¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:9; Psalm 91:14–16; Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:29–30; 1 John 4:19. God has prepared things beyond ordinary human imagination "for those who love Him." Psalm 91 likewise places special weight on the one who has "set his love" upon God. This love is not a

Here the other half of the Gospel comes into clearer focus. The good news is not only that God loves us, but also that, because He first loved us, we may set our love upon Him, know His name, call upon Him, and receive the deliverance, honor, satisfaction, and salvation spoken of in Psalm 91:14–16. Such love for God fulfills the Great Commandment and leads us also toward faithful participation in the Great Commission.²¹⁶

This Gospel calling — to receive God’s initiating love, love Him in return, surrender moral self-rule, and follow Christ in faithful obedience — is high, the benefits of God’s ways are many,²¹⁷ and the rewards He has prepared, both now and in the everlasting kingdom, surpass what most people stop to consider.²¹⁸

Christ’s path is not costless. It does require self-denial, endurance, and the surrender of our claim to live by our own rules and for ourselves alone. Yet His burden is light compared with the false promise and crushing consequences of moral autonomy, and His yoke is easy,²¹⁹ especially when set against the futility of trying to preserve our lives apart from God. Whoever seeks to keep his life on his

mechanical condition programmed into us, but a willing gift-response God invites and commands: we love Him because He first loved us, yet not all choose to set their love upon Him. Psalm 91 then connects this chosen love with knowing God’s name, calling upon Him, God’s presence in trouble, deliverance, honor, satisfaction, and finally the promise, “I will show him My salvation.”

²¹⁶ Compare 1 John 4:19; Mark 12:29–31; Psalm 91:14–16; Matthew 28:19–20. God’s love comes first, for “we love, because He first loved us.” Yet the first and greatest commandment remains the call to love the Lord our God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength. Psalm 91 speaks of the one who has loved God, known His name, and called upon Him, and of God’s promise to deliver, honor, satisfy, and show him His salvation. The Great Commission then directs those who follow Christ outward, teaching others to observe all that He commanded.

²¹⁷ Philippians 3:14; cf. Hebrews 3:1; 2 Timothy 1:9. Scripture speaks of the believer’s summons not as something low or casual, but as an upward, heavenly, and holy calling.

²¹⁸ Psalm 103:2; 1 Timothy 4:8; 2 Peter 1:10–11. David says, “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits.” Paul says that godliness holds promise “for the present life and also for the life to come,” while Peter speaks of an abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom. God’s rewards should therefore not be reduced to distant compensation only; His ways bring real benefits now and culminate in the everlasting kingdom He has prepared.

²¹⁹ Matthew 11:28–30; Matthew 16:24–26. Jesus calls the weary to come to Him, take His yoke, and learn from Him, saying that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. This does not remove self-denial, for Jesus also calls His disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him. Rather, Christ’s burden is light when compared with the futility of trying to save one’s life apart from God and the destructive consequences of moral self-rule.

own terms will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Christ's sake will find it.²²⁰ In that great paradox lies not misery, but true life: true riches, durable joy, and, through God's grace, an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom.²²¹

The path set before us is not merely one of information, but of transformation. God loves us first, not so that we may remain centered on ourselves, but so that we may be delivered from moral self-rule, reconciled to Him, taught by His grace, conformed to His Son's obedient path, and brought to set our love upon Him in return — for the good God delights in, for the good of others, and ultimately for the good of us all. What Christ first shows and gives is therefore meant to become the pattern of love received, love learned, and love returned:

love shown → love received → love learned → love returned

Christ therefore calls us not merely to receive, enjoy, or admire what He has done, but to learn from it, live by it, and increasingly embody it toward God and toward others.

The hope of glory helps clarify the magnitude of the calling. Scripture does not present salvation merely as pardon followed by endless existence, but as God's purpose to conform His children to the image of His Son and bring many sons and daughters to glory.²²² That hope should not make us passive. John says that when

²²⁰ Jesus repeatedly teaches this paradox of discipleship: "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39; see also Matt. 16:24–25; Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24). The point is not that life is found through self-destruction, but that the attempt to preserve oneself on one's own terms leads to loss, whereas surrender to Christ's way leads to life and the true riches that accompany it.

²²¹ Scripture speaks of "an abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11), of fullness of joy in God's presence and pleasures forevermore at His right hand (Ps. 16:11), and of what God has prepared for those who love Him beyond what eye has seen or ear has heard (1 Cor. 2:9). The path Christ sets before us is therefore not one of lasting deprivation, but of incomparable gain.

²²² Romans 8:29–30 says that those God foreknew He also predestined "to become conformed to the image of His Son," and that those He called and justified He also glorified. The emphasis here is on God's stated purpose for His children: conformity to Christ and final glory, not passive destiny detached from repentance, purification, and faithful conduct. Hebrews 2:10 speaks of God "bringing many sons to glory" through the Son, whose own path included humbling, obedience, and suffering. First John 3:2–3 adds that believers will be like Christ when He appears, and that everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself. Taken together, these passages present glorification not as a reason to neglect present growth, but as the promised

Christ appears, “we will be like Him,” and that everyone who sets this hope on Christ purifies himself. Glorification, then, is not a reason to neglect present growth, but a vision of the future that should strengthen our dedication to repentance, purification, character, agape love, fruitfulness, and faithful participation in the Great Commission now.

If sin is blamed chiefly on the flesh, then salvation can be imagined as forgiveness now and obedience later, once the flesh is removed. But if Eden’s root problem is moral self-rule, then salvation must reclaim the will, reorder our love, develop character, and teach us to live under God’s authority now — in this present age — not merely with the hope that obedience will become automatic when we are changed and see Him as He is.²²³

In summation, if the problem exposed in Eden is moral autonomy, then the remedy cannot be reduced to verbal profession or private religious sentiment. We are called to repent, to be baptized, and to submit ourselves to the Father’s will as Jesus did, entering the path of discipleship in earnest and learning to become people of faithful, godly, self-giving character. Because the risen Christ has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, His followers are commanded to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that He commanded. This is part of the faithful response to which the gospel calls us and which the Great Commission sets before us. If you have already chosen to follow Christ, then this calling is not optional. If you have not already chosen, then choose.

completion of God’s work in those who are being conformed to Christ and learning to walk in His steps.

²²³ Titus 2:11–14; Philippians 2:12–13; Romans 5:3–5; 1 John 3:2–3; Psalm 91:14–16; Matthew 16:24–25. Titus says that grace trains believers in the present age to deny ungodliness and live sensibly, righteously, and godly. Philippians joins human response and divine enabling: believers are to work out their salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work in them both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Romans connects tribulation, perseverance, proven character, hope, and the love of God poured out in our hearts. First John says we will be like Him when we see Him as He is, but immediately adds that everyone who has this hope purifies himself, just as He is pure. Psalm 91 connects God’s deliverance and salvation with the one who has set his love upon God, known His name, and called upon Him. Jesus likewise teaches that the one who loses his life for His sake will find it.

Epilogue

The How and Why Behind This Choice

Years ago, one of the first stories that helped me begin to see the kindness mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5–11 as more than a pleasant disposition or polite manner was the simple but moving story told through Disney’s live-action *Cinderella*. What struck me was not the romance or the fantasy, but the rare strength required by the kindness displayed. In Peter’s progression, kindness appears near the end of the ladder, after self-control, perseverance, and godliness. It is therefore not the easy kindness of pleasant manners, but the costly kind that remains gentle, returns good for evil, and gives blessing instead of cursing.²²⁴ Such kindness reflects the strength required to turn the other cheek, refuse retaliation, and continue doing good without becoming like those who do harm. It is not weakness. It is formed strength ordered under God, and it offers one small but memorable picture of the character God is seeking to develop in us as we mature toward *agape* love.²²⁵

This work is not offered as flawless or beyond refinement. It is offered openly and publicly as an invitation to test whether Scripture’s own sequence may help us understand God more clearly. May what is offered as light bring still more light, and may all that is true in God’s sight lead us to walk more faithfully in His ways. But faithful stewardship does not require waiting until every sentence is perfect before

²²⁴ Matthew 5:38–48; Luke 6:27–36; Romans 12:14, 17–21; 1 Peter 3:8–9. Jesus commands His disciples not to retaliate, but to love enemies, pray for persecutors, and do good. Paul likewise commands believers not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good. Peter says not to return evil for evil or insult for insult, but to give a blessing instead. Such kindness is therefore not mere pleasantness, but disciplined, God-formed strength expressed in costly good toward others.

²²⁵ 1 Peter 2:20–25. Peter’s discussion of Christ’s suffering occurs in a context that calls believers to endure even unjust suffering while doing what is right. He then says that “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” Christ’s example is therefore central to the passage. Peter further says that Christ “bore our sins in His body on the cross,” with the stated purpose “that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” In this context, “by His wounds you were healed” should be read together with the subsequent statement that believers had been “straying like sheep” but have now returned to “the Shepherd and Guardian” of their souls. The healing in view is therefore restoration from sinful wandering into righteous, obedient life under the Shepherd whose footsteps we are called to follow.

giving what has been received,²²⁶ or before sounding an alarm that should no longer be withheld.²²⁷

Christ's example of humbling Himself and becoming obedient to the Father should be more clearly taught—as our model, and not merely as the basis for pardon—because the call to follow Him is too important to leave indefinitely underemphasized.

Finally, knowing what we now understand about the relationship between Jesus and the Father, we should ask: who decided that the one who is least in the kingdom is greatest? Because Jesus speaks the Father's words, this teaching reflects not only the Son's humility, but the Father's own definition of greatness.²²⁸ It gives us a glimpse into the Father's heart, the character of the Son who reveals Him, and why we may safely trust the Father as Jesus Himself did and does. Both the Father and the Son are truly worthy, for the love They first showed us is the love we are now called to learn, return to God, and give to others.

For this reason, both God Most High and His firstborn Son are clearly worthy of our trust, our gratitude, our praise, our chosen allegiance, and our wholehearted commitment; and Christ, as the faithful Son, is worthy of our imitation as the pattern for reconciled humanity.

²²⁶ Scripture repeatedly treats what has been received from God as something to be stewarded, not buried until all risk, limitation, or imperfection has disappeared. Jesus' parable of the talents warns against hiding what has been entrusted out of fear, while Peter says that each one should use the gift he has received in serving others "as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." See Matthew 25:14–30; 1 Peter 4:10–11. Paul likewise urges Timothy to kindle afresh the gift of God and not shrink back in fear or shame. See 2 Timothy 1:6–8. This does not excuse carelessness, presumption, or refusal of correction; it means that faithful stewardship may require giving what has been received while continuing to grow, be corrected, and mature.

²²⁷ Ezekiel 33:1–9 presents the watchman as responsible to sound the warning when he sees danger. If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, the blood of those who perish is required from his hand; but if he gives warning, he has delivered himself. The present work should not be equated directly with Ezekiel's prophetic office, yet the principle is sobering: once a person becomes persuaded that a serious warning should be given, silence may no longer be a neutral option. This also accords with the Great Commission, which does not command only perfected disciples to act, but sends still-growing disciples to make more disciples, teaching them as best they can to observe all that Christ commanded.

²²⁸ John 12:49–50; John 14:10; Matthew 23:11–12; Mark 10:42–45. Jesus says that the Father gave Him commandment concerning what to say and what to speak, and that the words He speaks are not spoken on His own initiative. Therefore, His teaching that greatness in the kingdom is found in humility and service reflects the Father's own values, not an independent standard detached from the Father's rule.

Again, the Great Commission is not a closing slogan, nor a final burst of missionary energy. It is the highest outward expression of mature discipleship because it expresses, in active form, the very thing God is doing: gathering, forming, and preparing a people who can live under His rule in holiness, unity, endurance, and *agape* love. It is therefore not a side task, but a kingdom task; not a marginal concern, but a central one requiring spiritual development that leads us not only to receive, but also to give ourselves for the good of God and others. Obedience is not only submission to rightful authority; it also means learning to participate in the good order by which God intends joy, peace, trust, and *agape* love to be received, embodied, and given.²²⁹

Agree with God, then walk accordingly. To walk with God, one must first come into agreement with Him:

“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?”
—Amos 3:3, NKJV

And God has not left mankind to define good for himself:

“He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justly,
To love mercy,
And to walk humbly with your God?”
—Micah 6:8, NKJV

Agreement with God is therefore not meant to remain merely inward, spoken, or theoretical. To agree with God about what is good is to learn to walk with Him accordingly — indeed, and in deed.

That is the path from Eden to the Great Commission: understanding received, agreement yielded, wisdom practiced, character formed, godliness matured, *agape* love enacted, and truth given onward with hope.

²²⁹ Matthew 10:8. Jesus’ words, “Freely you received, freely give,” were spoken to His disciples as He sent them out. The principle fits the larger movement of this work: what God first gives—truth, grace, mercy, instruction, forgiveness, joy, peace, trust, and *agape* love—is not meant to terminate on us, but to be received, learned, embodied, and given onward for the good of God and others. In this sense, the Great Commission is not merely the transfer of information, but the outward giving of what God has first given and formed within His people.

“Freely you received, freely give.”
—Matthew 10:8

Indeed — and in deed.

Annotated Bibliography

Selected Sources for Context, Corroboration, and Further Study

A claim about Scripture should not be dismissed merely because it is unfamiliar. “Surely I would already have heard it” is not careful reasoning; unfamiliarity is not the same as error.

The argument of this manuscript is made primarily from Scripture itself. The following sources are therefore not presented as the foundation of the argument, but as selected witnesses showing that several of its major concerns have relevant precedent, overlap, historical context, or documented plausibility. Some sources support particular interpretive possibilities; others help explain the historical and theological assumptions through which readers may already approach the subject. They are included so that unfamiliarity with the manuscript’s claims will not be mistaken for evidence against them. Taken together, these sources do not prove the whole argument, which must finally be tested by Scripture itself, but they help show that the reading advanced here is far more than a speculative possibility.

Prager, Dennis. *The Rational Bible: Genesis*. Washington, DC: Regnery Faith, 2019.

Prager, a widely read Jewish commentator on the Torah, states that the Genesis 3 phrase “knowing good and evil” can mean being the one who determines what is good and what is evil, and he connects this meaning to what the serpent was suggesting to Eve. He further relates this reading to what he calls the moral message of the Torah: that God determines good and evil, and that when man determines good and evil, man becomes god-like. This source is not cited as support for the manuscript’s further observations about Christ’s obedience, discipleship, or the Great Commission. Its specific value is potentially enormous, because it documents the bona fide plausibility of reading “knowing good and evil” within Genesis 3 as a matter of moral authority or moral determination, rather than merely as the acquisition of moral awareness.

Bonner, Ali. *The Myth of Pelagianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2018.

Bonner's study was published by Oxford University Press for the British Academy and reflects doctoral and postdoctoral research supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Academy, Jesus College, Oxford, and Hughes Hall, Cambridge. Bonner argues that "Pelagianism" never existed as the coherent heretical movement it was widely accepted to be, but was a composite fiction created in an effort to discredit Pelagius by attaching alleged teachings to him. She contends that teachings attributed to Pelagius were often distorted, misrepresented, or already widely present in earlier ascetic Christian literature, including emphases on learning to live according to Christ's way of life. Her work is important for the present manuscript because even the mere appeal to "Pelagianism" can short-circuit careful reasoning whenever a Christian argument emphasizes meaningful human response, obedience, moral formation, or non-passive participation under grace. This source is not cited to settle the theological questions raised here, but to show that the widely assumed anti-Pelagian framework is historically contested and should not be used as a quick dismissal of Scripture-based arguments for repentance, character formation, and faithful obedience.

Wilson, Ken. *The Foundation of Augustinian-Calvinism*. Regula Fidei Press, 2019.

Wilson, an M.D. and Oxford D.Phil., presents a shorter, more accessible version of his doctoral research on Augustine's movement from traditional Christian free choice toward what Wilson calls "non-free free will." Wilson argues that Augustine's later theology introduced, or at least consolidated, deterministic/fatalistic elements that were not characteristic of earlier Christian teaching, and that these later Augustinian developments became foundational for Calvinist theology. This source is not cited to settle every question about Augustine, Calvin, or predestination, but to provide historical context for why some Christian readers may instinctively interpret grace, sin, and salvation through categories that diminish meaningful human response. Its value for the present manuscript is that it helps document the plausibility of questioning deterministic/fatalistic readings that weaken repentance, obedience, endurance, character formation, and the consequential nature of the Great Commission.

Barron, Robert. “Bishop Barron on Original Sin.” Word on Fire PDF transcript, undated. <https://media.wordonfire.org/ebooks/Bishop-Barron-on-Original-Sin.pdf> with corresponding YouTube video published Mar. 7, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fdmsnbz1-EE>

This short Word on Fire transcript is a particularly clear Roman Catholic example of an interpretation that the Fall involved more than the isolated act of eating forbidden fruit. Barron argues that God Himself is the proper criterion of good and evil, and that the original sin consisted in human beings “arrogating to ourselves the prerogative of determining good and evil” — that is, wrongly seizing for ourselves what belongs to God alone. He emphasizes that the original sin was “not really so much a particular offense,” such as murder, theft, or adultery, but something deeper and more fundamental: the human will becoming the criterion and measure of good and evil rather than God. This source is especially useful for the present manuscript because it closely parallels the claim that Eden’s root problem was moral autonomy — moral self-rule — and not merely a discrete rule violation. It also provides a potentially helpful bridge for Roman Catholic readers, since Barron’s explanation resonates strongly with the manuscript’s central claim that repentance involves returning the moral prerogative to God.

Sala, Nate. “The Hidden Meaning of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” YouTube video premiered Oct. 20, 2025:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-pK1avU3QA&t=735s>

This public-facing Christian apologetics and Bible-teaching video is useful as a Protestant-facing example of renewed attention to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Sala argues that “knowledge of good and evil” refers not merely to acquiring moral information, but to claiming “the moral authority to determine right and wrong for oneself.” In his summary, “the fall of mankind was not based on learning morality but determining morality,” and “the tree was not about information. It was about independence.” Although Sala does not develop the fuller theological sequence presented in this manuscript, this portion provides a clear contemporary example of the central insight: Eden’s root issue was not merely fruit, knowledge, or isolated rule-breaking, but the creature’s attempt to assume moral prerogative apart from God. The video may therefore serve as a useful bridge for readers shaped by Protestant Bible teaching, especially in evangelical or apologetics-oriented contexts.

Harwood, Adam. “The Doctrine of Sin: Inherited Guilt?” YouTube video, posted July 18, 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qw_Z7-zyEo

Harwood surveys major Christian views of Original Sin, with special attention to inherited guilt, inherited corruption, and inherited consequences. His discussion is useful for showing that Christians have not held a single, undisputed formulation of Original Sin, and that inherited personal guilt is not the only serious Christian option. Of particular relevance to this manuscript is his distinction between inheriting Adam’s consequences — mortality, corruption, and life in a fallen world — and becoming personally guilty through one’s own sin. This supports the manuscript’s recognition of the damaging consequences of moral self-rule, while preserving its emphasis on practiced sin, personal repentance, and the development of faithful character in Christ.

Harwood, Adam. “Getting the Ordo Salutis Right.” YouTube video/interview, posted Dec. 1, 2025: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nQXvu2E720>

Although the title may sound technical, this discussion is useful for the present manuscript because it illustrates how major theological frameworks can depend on prior definitions, assumptions, and logical constructions that are not always stated explicitly in Scripture. Harwood distinguishes a Reformed/decreed-based model of salvation, rooted in divine determinism and God’s eternal decree, from “whosoever will” approaches that think more naturally in terms of gospel proclamation, repentance, faith, confession, and baptism as seen in the New Testament witness. Of particular relevance is the caution that some doctrinal frameworks may be built on implicit or speculative reasoning concerning matters not clearly revealed in Scripture. This supports the manuscript’s broader methodological concern: inherited theological systems should be respected and examined carefully, but they should not be allowed to govern interpretation where Scripture’s own sequence, emphasis, and practical call to repentance, obedience, and transformed life point in a clearer direction. The discussion is also useful because Harwood treats salvation through multiple biblical images — including deliverance, kingdom entrance, new life, belonging to God’s family, forgiveness, reconciliation, sanctification, transformation, and participation — which accords with this manuscript’s refusal to reduce salvation to pardon alone.

Addendum: Original Sin, Moral Self-Rule, and Human Responsibility

One Example of How Inherited Doctrinal Assumptions May Be Tested by Scripture

When Original Sin is framed primarily as inherited personal guilt, the central arc of this manuscript can become almost impossible to see. The Bible's repeated emphasis is not that humans inherit Adam's personal guilt. It is that humans repeat and persist in the same kind of departure seen in Eden: moral self-rule — doing what is right in our own eyes instead of humbly deferring to God's authority to define good and evil.²³⁰

If the human problem is treated mainly as inherited guilt, salvation is often imagined mainly as the cancellation of that guilt, with changed conduct treated as secondary, or as something that follows almost automatically.²³¹ But if the root problem is moral self-rule — doing what seems right in our own eyes²³² — then repentance must be more than regret and more than acceptance of pardon. It must mean turning from our tendency to define good and evil for ourselves, yielding that moral authority back to God, and learning to conduct ourselves accordingly.

If the problem is framed mainly as inherited guilt or blindness, pardon and clearer perception may appear to be the central remedy. But if the deeper problem is moral self-rule, then pardon alone—even if followed by clearer understanding—

²³⁰ Compare Deuteronomy 12:8: “You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes.” See also Judges 21:25. The repeated phrase captures the practical expression of moral self-rule: conduct governed by one's own judgment rather than humble submission to God's revealed way.

²³¹ This concern also touches some ways of explaining inherited corruption or total depravity. If the human problem is framed mainly as inherited guilt, corruption, or inability to perceive spiritual truth rightly, then salvation may be imagined mainly as God removing that inherited barrier through forgiveness, regeneration, or illumination, after which agreement with God is expected to follow almost naturally. But Scripture does not present the problem as though clarified perception alone would reliably produce obedience, or as though grace removes the need for meaningful repentance, learning, and participation. Satan and those who follow his way illustrate that knowledge, power, or access to heavenly realities does not by itself guarantee humble submission to God's authority. The key to harmony is not clearer perception by itself, but the yielding of moral self-rule back to God, so that people may learn to walk together under His definitions of good and evil rather than their own.

²³² Compare Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” See also Judges 21:25, where moral disorder is summarized by the statement that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

cannot produce the repentant obedience, character, and agape love Christ calls His followers to learn and practice.

This distinction matters because Scripture repeatedly grounds moral accountability in each person's own conduct, not in Adam's personal guilt being treated as ours. Ezekiel declares, "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity" (Ezekiel 18:20). The same chapter also teaches that the wicked man who turns from his sins and practices righteousness will live, while the righteous man who turns from righteousness and practices iniquity will die. Ezekiel 33:11 likewise presents God's desire not as the destruction of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. These passages do not deny that one generation may suffer consequences from another generation's sins. Scripture often shows such consequences. But Ezekiel reminds us that each person is accountable for his own sin, and that inherited consequence should not be confused with inherited personal guilt.

Psalm 51:5 is often raised in this discussion: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." This verse should be handled carefully, because David is confessing the depth and pervasiveness of his sin after grievous wrongdoing involving Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. His language supports the seriousness of human sinfulness, especially his own, but it does not require the conclusion that every infant is personally guilty of Adam's act, especially in light of Ezekiel's explicit principle that the son does not bear punishment for the father's iniquity.

This also helps clarify the moral condition of infants and very young children. As explained above, Scripture does not require us to treat the very young as already personally guilty of Adam's act. Little children are not already wise, mature, disciplined, or morally developed, but neither are they already guilty of intentional rebellion. Jesus' words that we must become like little children in order to enter the kingdom point in this same direction: children are not presented by Jesus as models of mature righteousness, but of receptivity, dependence, humility, and teachability. Children begin their lives by observing, evaluating, desiring, and trying to make sense of what they are taught and experience. That is not itself rebellion, but part of the kind of development God intends. The problem begins when evaluation becomes moral prerogative: when human beings move beyond trying to understand

what has been given to them as good,²³³ and begin claiming the right to define good and evil for themselves — even in simple beginnings such as, “I see no problem taking the extra cookie when Mom is not looking.”

Romans 5 must also be taken seriously. Adam’s sin is not a private event with no effect on later generations. Through Adam, sin and death entered the human story. But Paul’s larger contrast is between Adam and Christ: Adam’s transgression brought condemnation and death; Christ’s obedience brings justification and life. The answer to Adam is not merely a legal pardon that leaves moral self-rule intact.²³⁴ The answer to Adam’s pattern of moral self-rule is the Son who did not treat equality with God as something to be seized or exploited, but humbled Himself to become obedient²³⁵ — and whose footsteps we are called to follow, even denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses when faithfulness requires it.

First Corinthians 15 strengthens this point. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Paul’s emphasis is not inherited guilt, but death in Adam and resurrection in Christ. God’s goal is not to immortalize morally self-ruled humans just as they are, without spiritual development or transformed character. His goal is to raise those who belong to Christ in His likeness — persons already being trained in faithfulness now, and

²³³ Compare Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” The issue is not that human beings should never observe, evaluate, or seek understanding. The issue is whether we humbly receive what God has shown to be good and learn to walk accordingly, or whether we claim for ourselves the authority to define good and evil. Compare also Amos 3:3: “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” To walk with God, we must come into agreement with His ways rather than insisting on our own.

²³⁴ Compare Romans 6:1–2: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!” Paul does not treat grace as a legal covering that allows sin to continue undisturbed. Grace joins the believer to Christ’s death and life, so that the old life is to be put off rather than preserved under pardon.

²³⁵ Philippians 2:6–8. The KJV says Christ “thought it not robbery to be equal with God,” and the NKJV similarly says He “did not consider it robbery to be equal with God.” Other translations render the phrase in terms of not grasping, exploiting, or clinging to equality with God. For the present argument, the key point is that the Son did not seize independent advantage or act in self-rule, but humbled Himself and became obedient.

being steadily matured toward the completeness God intends, even as the Father is perfect,²³⁶ so that entrance into the everlasting kingdom may be richly supplied.²³⁷

Again, Jesus' humbling of Himself to become obedient is not a legal adjustment that leaves our disobedience intact, but the faithful path into which His followers are called. He is the faithful firstborn Son, and those who belong to Him are not only pardoned, but trained to observe all that He commanded and to participate in that same disciple-making work.²³⁸

All considered, this manuscript does not need to settle every historical dispute over Original Sin in order to make its central point. It does, however, provide one example of how inherited doctrinal assumptions should be tested: not by labels alone, but by Scripture's own emphasis and logic. In this case, Scripture repeatedly returns us to what is clear: we live in the damaged world that followed Adam's sin; we practice sin individually and collectively; we are called to turn from our own ways; and we are summoned into the obedient life of Christ, where disciples are trained to observe all that He commanded and to help make other disciples.

God does not merely forgive moral self-rule while leaving our wayward ways intact. He forgives to reconcile, teaches to correct, trains to transform, and raises the faithful to share life, glory, and delegated authority in His everlasting kingdom without returning to Eden's rebellion.²³⁹

²³⁶ Compare Matthew 5:48: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In context, this perfection is not mere rule-keeping or flawless technical performance, but mature completeness in God-defined love, including love for enemies.

²³⁷ See 2 Peter 1:5–11, where faith is to be supplied with moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love, so that the believer will not be useless or unfruitful and entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied.

²³⁸ See Matthew 28:19–20, where Jesus commissions His followers to make disciples, baptizing them and "teaching them to observe all" that He commanded. The Great Commission is therefore not merely a call to secure professions of faith, but to form obedient disciples who learn and practice the way of Christ.

²³⁹ See 2 Timothy 3:16–17, where Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. Compare Matthew 6:33, where Jesus teaches His disciples to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness. The righteousness God teaches is therefore not self-defined moral improvement, but righteousness received from God, corrected by God, and practiced according to His will.

Addendum: Testing Orthodoxy by Scripture

Why Inherited Doctrinal Assumptions Must Be Tested by Scripture

The word *orthodoxy* ordinarily means right or correct teaching. In that proper sense, Christians should value orthodoxy and seek to preserve it. Truth should not be discarded merely because it is old, widely accepted, or expressed in a creed, confession, or longstanding tradition. Earlier generations often wrestled seriously with difficult questions, and their conclusions may preserve valuable insight, identify dangers, and warn against careless novelty.

But the label *orthodox* does not by itself prove that a doctrine is true.

A teaching may become established through repetition, institutional acceptance, the influence of major theologians—especially Augustine in the Latin West—councils, confessions, seminaries, or the desire of religious communities to define and defend their boundaries.

Over time, inherited conclusions may become so familiar that they are no longer perceived as interpretations to be tested, but as the unquestionable standard by which Scripture itself must be interpreted.

That reverses the proper order.

Scripture should not be required to conform to what later generations have called orthodox. What is called orthodox must remain subject to correction by Scripture. True orthodoxy is not whatever has prevailed historically, but teaching that faithfully accords with the word, ways, and revealed purposes of God.

The issue, therefore, is not whether Christians should embrace orthodoxy or reject it. The issue is whether what has been received as orthodoxy is genuinely scriptural.

Jesus' Warning About Tradition

Jesus did not condemn every tradition merely because it had been passed down from earlier generations. He condemned the scribes and Pharisees because they allowed human traditions—and the interpretations embedded within them—to displace the words and commandments of God. They held to their tradition while

neglecting, setting aside, and even invalidating God's word by means of it (Mark 7:6–13).

That warning did not cease to apply after the first century. Indeed, many formulations now treated as decisive tests of Christian orthodoxy were not given their creedal or conciliar form until centuries after the apostles. The first ecumenical council met at Nicaea in 325; its creed was developed further at Constantinople in 381; and additional doctrinal definitions followed at Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451. The Western doctrine of original sin was likewise articulated more precisely in the fifth century, especially under Augustine's influence.

Those later dates do not, by themselves, prove that the resulting doctrines are false. But they do establish that these are post-apostolic formulations—and therefore that they must remain subject to testing by the earlier scriptural witness they claim to express.

Every later creed, confession, council, denomination, theological system, and doctrinal formulation remains subject to the same test:

Does this tradition faithfully express Scripture, or does it cause us to reinterpret, weaken, or set aside Scripture in order to preserve the tradition?

The danger may increase as inherited interpretations are expanded into increasingly comprehensive theological systems. Doctrinal committees naturally seek consistency and coherence, but the effort to answer every question and reconcile every part of a system can produce chapter after chapter of conclusions that extend far beyond a few direct scriptural statements. Works such as the Westminster Confession of Faith and its accompanying catechisms illustrate how an interpretation can develop into an extensive, interconnected doctrinal structure. Once the parts depend upon one another, a direct passage of Scripture that challenges one conclusion may appear to threaten the coherence of the whole system—and the temptation may then be to qualify the passage rather than reconsider the system.

The danger is not confined to Roman Catholicism or to churches that formally claim authoritative tradition. Protestant groups may reject the authority of the Roman Church while still receiving inherited doctrinal assumptions from Augustine, Luther, Calvin, later confessions, or influential evangelical teachers. Even churches that insist they follow “the Bible alone” may interpret Scripture

through conclusions that have already become functionally immune from reconsideration.

A tradition does not cease to be a human tradition merely because it is old, Protestant, widely accepted, or called orthodox. Nor does a teaching become false merely because it challenges an established interpretation. Both inherited doctrine and newer proposals must be tested by Scripture.

When Direct Statements of Scripture Become Difficult to Hear

The need for reexamination becomes especially apparent when inherited doctrines seem difficult to reconcile with direct statements of Scripture.

The four examples that follow summarize arguments developed more fully elsewhere in this manuscript. They are presented here not as isolated proof texts, but as direct scriptural statements that inherited theological systems must account for honestly.

1. A Son Does Not Bear His Father's Guilt

God states through Ezekiel:

“The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity” (Ezekiel 18:20).

The chapter repeatedly emphasizes personal moral responsibility. The person who sins will die; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon him.

Yet the Augustinian doctrine of original sin came to teach that Adam’s guilt, condemnation, or culpability is inherited by his descendants. Different traditions explain this inheritance in different ways, but the direct statement of Ezekiel remains: the son does not bear the father’s iniquity.

This does not mean that children suffer no consequences from the sins of previous generations. Scripture and ordinary experience plainly show that they often do. Consequences may be inherited. Corrupt environments, damaged relationships, destructive customs, and bodily mortality may affect later generations.

But inherited consequences are not the same as inherited personal guilt.

If a doctrine appears to require the son to bear the guilt of his father, Scripture should be allowed to test the doctrine. The direct statement should not be neutralized merely because an inherited theological framework has taught us to expect a different conclusion.

2. The Wicked Person Who Turns Is Genuinely Forgiven—and Will Live

Ezekiel teaches that when a wicked person turns away from his sins, practices justice and righteousness, and walks in God's ways, his former transgressions will not be remembered against him; he shall surely live and shall not die (Ezekiel 18:21–23; 33:14–16).

This is not forgiveness without repentance. Nor is it repentance that earns salvation independently of God's mercy. It is God Himself declaring how He responds when a sinner genuinely turns. The sinner abandons wickedness and practices righteousness; God no longer remembers his former sins against him and declares that he will live rather than die.

The passage therefore presents forgiveness as a genuine moral and relational response from God. It does not portray repentance as merely evidence that an otherwise completed transaction has already occurred. The person turns from the path leading to death, and God receives that turning as consequential.

This sequence does not by itself settle every question concerning the purposes of Christ's suffering and death. It does, however, require any theory of atonement to account honestly for God's own declaration that a wicked person who turns from his sins will be forgiven and will live rather than die. A later theological system should not be permitted to obscure repentance as the expressly stated path from death to life in these passages.

Nor is this summons confined to Ezekiel's original audience. Paul later declared that God "is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Peter likewise describes the Lord as patient, "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Repentance therefore remains God's universal summons and His stated desire for those otherwise headed toward destruction—and not a dispensable supplement to a view of salvation as a transaction completed without a person's meaningful response.

3. Jesus Identified the Father as “the Only True God”

In prayer, Jesus addressed His Father and said:

“This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3).

Jesus did not identify Himself and the Father together as “the only true God” in this statement. He addressed the Father as the only true God and distinguished Himself as the Messiah whom the Father had sent.

This statement is consistent with the broader scriptural pattern in which the Father sends, commands, authorizes, exalts, and gives authority to the Son—and ultimately receives the Son’s willing subjection (1 Corinthians 15:27–28).

In Eden, humanity reached toward moral autonomy—the Godlike prerogative to determine good and evil for itself. The serpent promised that the humans would be “like God,” and God later said that the man had become “like one of Us, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5, 22). By contrast, the Word who was with God and was God did not use His divine status as grounds for independent self-assertion. As Philippians 2 explains, He emptied Himself, humbled Himself before the Father by becoming obedient—even to death on a cross—and was therefore highly exalted by the Father. Christ’s glory is not diminished by His obedience; His willing self-humbling and obedience are central to His glory. If the One who was with God and was God humbled Himself before the Father and became obedient, how much more should we too relinquish moral autonomy, humble ourselves before God, and follow in the obedient steps of Jesus?

Christ’s humility and obedience do more than reveal the Father’s supremacy. They also show the reversal of Eden. Where moral self-rule reaches for the right to determine its own way, Christ submits Himself to the Father and says, in effect and in deed, “Not My will, but Yours.” His exaltation does not erase this proper order. The authority and glory He possesses are given by the Father, and Scripture ultimately portrays the Son willingly subjecting Himself to the One who subjected all things to Him.

To insist that the glorified Son must now have returned to equality with the Father in ultimate authority may preserve a later creedal formulation, but it should not be allowed to erase the scriptural pattern of the Father’s unique supremacy and the Son’s continuing, willing, and glorious obedience (1 Corinthians 15:27–28, which

expressly excludes the Father from the things subjected to the Son and says that the Son Himself will ultimately be subjected to the Father).

4. Christ Suffered for Us, Leaving an Example to Follow

Peter writes:

“When you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Peter 2:20b–21).

The sequence is striking:

- disciples do what is right;
- they may suffer unjustly;
- faithful endurance finds favor with God;
- Christ also suffered for them;
- His suffering left them an example;
- they are called to follow in His steps.

Peter does not separate what Christ did *for us* from the path we must follow.

Christ’s suffering for us establishes the pattern into which we are called.

The surrounding verses reinforce that purpose. Christ committed no sin, did not retaliate when reviled, and entrusted Himself to the One who judges righteously. Peter then says that He “bore our sins in His body on the cross” so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; through His wounds we were healed and, as wandering sheep, returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:22–25).

This is more than a legal transaction occurring outside us. It is deliverance from the way of sin into the way of righteousness. Christ’s faithfulness becomes both the means of reconciliation and the path of discipleship.

Some inherited atonement theories commonly regarded as orthodox have emphasized Christ’s suffering so predominantly as something accomplished in our place that Peter’s explicit participatory emphasis can recede into the background. Peter does not diminish the unique significance of what Christ suffered for us; he

nevertheless presents that suffering as providing His followers with an example whose steps they are called to follow.

Christ's suffering is unique in significance, and no disciple can replace Him. But neither may the apostle's stated exemplary and participatory purpose be reduced to a secondary detail.

These four examples should therefore be read together and in light of the fuller scriptural case developed throughout this manuscript. Their purpose here is not to repeat that entire case, but to illustrate why no inherited doctrinal assumption should be considered immune from testing—and correction when necessary—by Scripture.

A Coherent Scriptural Pattern

Taken together, these passages present a remarkably coherent pattern:

Personal responsibility rather than inherited guilt; genuine repentance and forgiveness; the Father's unique supremacy, acknowledged by Christ through His willing self-humbling and obedience; and our own calling to follow that same faithful path in Christ's steps.

These are not four unrelated objections to traditional doctrine. They illuminate one another.

The person is responsible for his own response to God. The wicked may genuinely turn and receive genuine forgiveness. The Father remains the supreme moral authority. Christ shows the way back from moral self-rule by humbling Himself and becoming obedient. Those who are reconciled through Him are called to follow His steps, die to sin, live to righteousness, and grow into faithful character and agape love.

This is the developmental arc traced throughout this manuscript.

God does not merely cancel a legal charge while leaving moral autonomy—moral self-rule—untouched: humanity's continuing willingness to define good and evil independently of Him. He calls people to turn from that self-rule, forgives those who genuinely turn, teaches them His ways, forms within them the faithful character revealed in His Son, and prepares sons and daughters who can be entrusted with a share in His kingdom.

These examples illustrate the danger that arises when an inherited theological system determines in advance what a direct scriptural statement is permitted to mean. Context and the whole biblical witness must always be considered, but the whole must be built from the parts; the parts should not be forced to conform to a theological synthesis that has already been declared untouchable.

The question is whether the system helps us understand Scripture more faithfully, or whether it prevents Scripture from correcting the system. The more direct Scripture becomes, the more revealing it may be when increasingly elaborate explanations are required to keep its words from disturbing inherited doctrine.

True Orthodoxy Requires Teachability

Reexamining inherited doctrine is not necessarily rebellion against orthodoxy. It may be an effort to recover true orthodoxy.

Where there is no room for learning, pride, fear, or both may well be the problem.

Jesus promised that the Spirit of truth would guide His disciples into all the truth (John 16:13). How can we remain open to that guidance if inherited conclusions are treated as beyond reconsideration?

Christians should not celebrate novelty merely because it is novel. Unfamiliarity does not prove truth. But neither does familiarity prove truth. A doctrine's age, institutional prestige, widespread acceptance, or success in defeating rivals cannot substitute for scriptural demonstration.

Tradition may serve as a diagnostic witness. It can show what questions earlier believers asked, what dangers they feared, and how they attempted to preserve what they understood to be true. It deserves respectful consideration.

But tradition must remain evidence to be tested, not the final authority that determines the outcome before the testing begins.

The proper posture is neither contempt for the past nor captivity to it. It is humble teachability before God.

True teachability requires humility to receive correction when Scripture warrants it and courage to reconsider inherited conclusions when Scripture requires it.

This Manuscript Must Face the Same Test

The principles stated in this addendum apply fully to *Understanding God*.

Its conclusions should not be accepted merely because they are presented confidently, because they appear coherent, or because they challenge established teaching. Nor should they be rejected merely because they differ from doctrines commonly called orthodox.

This manuscript must stand only insofar as it withstands careful testing by Scripture.

True orthodoxy must remain teachable before God.

Letter to Bible Teachers, Pastors, and Theologians

Dear _____,

I am forwarding to you a copy of the PDF, *Understanding God: From Eden to the Great Commission*, because I believe it raises biblical and theological questions worthy of careful examination by Bible teachers, pastors, theologians, and serious students of Scripture. I would be grateful for any comments, cautions, corrections, or discussion you may be willing to offer.

The manuscript now opens with a Preface intended to provide a roadmap for the scriptural argument that follows. The central argument begins with Genesis 3. Eve judged the forbidden tree to be “good” and “desirable” before she ate, which suggests that the first human departure from God was not merely the outward act of eating forbidden fruit, but the prior willingness to define good and evil apart from God. In that light, Adam and Eve became “like” God not merely by gaining moral awareness, but by assuming moral prerogative — the authority to determine good and evil for themselves.

If this understanding is correct, then the ramifications are not small.

1. **Adam and Eve became “like” God** not merely by gaining moral awareness, but by taking up moral prerogative, attempting to define good and evil apart from God.
2. **The doctrine of original sin deserves reconsideration.** Genesis 3:6 suggests that the inward turn toward self-defined good preceded the outward act of eating, which means the root issue was not the eating of toxic fruit as such, but moral self-rule expressed in transgression. Adam and Eve were therefore not pure in heart and mind until the instant they ate; the act exposed and confirmed a prior inward departure.
3. **The “Us” in Genesis 3:22 becomes more meaningfully significant.** If “like one of Us, knowing good and evil” refers to divine moral prerogative, then the identity of the “Us” deserves closer attention, especially in relation to the Word who was with God and was God before becoming flesh. The statement is unlikely to refer merely to lesser heavenly beings rather than to the One now known as the Father and to the Word who became flesh.

4. **Christ's obedience is the decisive reversal of Eden's moral self-rule.** Where Adam and Eve reached toward Godlike prerogative, the Son humbled Himself and became obedient to the Father, even to the point of death. His obedience is therefore the pattern by which disciples are also called out of moral self-rule and into faithful life under the Father's will.
5. **Wisdom and *agape* love become more clearly distinguished.** Wisdom can be understood as applied understanding for one's own good as a basic form of self-love. *Agape* love goes further: applied understanding for the good of others, often at real cost. There is a similarity between them, but also a striking difference in direction: toward oneself, or toward others—especially in service to God Himself.
6. **Character becomes essential,** for understanding alone does not reliably produce faithful application. Wisdom requires character if it is to be practiced faithfully, and *agape* love requires yet more: the maturity, self-control, endurance, and self-denial needed to seek another's good. Such character is needed not only in this present age, but also for the trustworthy practice of unselfish *agape* love forevermore.
7. **Character development must be oriented toward godliness in order to remain stable and sustainable.** Knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and even consistent character can be useful, but they are not automatically godly. Character enables a person to apply understanding consistently; godliness directs that character according to God's ways. Character must remain ordered toward the godliness that begins with repentance; otherwise, discipline, productivity, or perseverance may strengthen self-defined goals contrary to God's will rather than lead toward kindness, *agape* love, and faithful participation in God's household forever.
8. **The Great Commission becomes the outward expression of mature *agape* love.** If *agape* love seeks the good of others, then disciples who have received and learned Christ's way should help others become disciples who observe all that He commanded. God is not developing passive spectators, but trustworthy sons and daughters who will contribute faithfully to the welfare of His entire household.

I am asking whether the biblical sequence traced here deserves closer attention, because if the manuscript's conclusions are substantially correct, then its implications for repentance, grace, obedience, Christology, discipleship, character, and the Great Commission should not be ignored.

Thank you for any time and careful attention you may be willing to give it.

Sincerely,