

The God Beyond Your Wildest Dreams

A Study Guide

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CHAPTER 1

The God Who Pursues Me

Party hearty,' I said to myself each night. But I woke up in the morning feeling empty. Drugs, alcohol, fancy foods, and fine women never gratified my cravings. Finding no lasting contentment, I launched public works programs and organized cultural experiences in the arts. While others may have been enriched, I felt like a dog chasing his tail. I sought a remedy for a life sick with meaninglessness.

"I threw myself into my career, obtaining fame, power, money, and treasures. I had it all, things of which others only dream. Yet I found myself grasping at soap bubbles. All the iridescent promises of these pursuits burst as I held them. I spent my life chasing the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:1–11, author's paraphrase).

King Solomon's experience parallels our search for meaning and contentment in life. We grasp for the beauty of the soap bubbles' iridescent promises, then *pop!* they burst and leave us empty. Some relentlessly travel the roads Solomon described, chasing one soap bubble after the next, but they never reach their sought-after destination. They spend their lives pursuing what they will never obtain. Others become disillusioned and give up, convinced that true contentment, like Aesop's sour grapes, remains unattainable. They settle for half-lives, rummaging through the garbage cans for life's scraps.

God gives us hope. In Him, we find love, meaning, purpose, and satisfaction. When restored to our Creator, we become whole again. The gospel explains how God restores mankind after sin.

A voting booth in Eden

Adam and Eve's hearts beat as one with God, completely united with Him in purity and righteousness. Like trusting children, they freely rested in the love and provision of their heavenly Father. Wanting beings that loved Him, and not robots programed to mimic responses of love, the Father created His children with the choice to love Him or leave Him.

God placed two trees as a voting booth in Eden to demonstrate their choice for or against His governing their lives (Genesis 2:9). As Adam and Eve ate from the tree of life, they demonstrated their allegiance to God, the source of life. God, like a nurturing Father, explained that rejecting His rule by choosing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil meant death because they would separate themselves from the only source of life (Genesis 2:16, 17). God warned them of the rebellious angelic prince who had a vendetta to settle against Him because He cast him out of heaven.

The adversary introduced distrust in his attempt to separate Adam and Eve from a life of

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blissful contentment with Yahweh, their personal God. Satan came disguised as an ancient serpent—then one of God’s most beautiful creatures (Jewish tradition pictures the serpent as a golden dragon; when stretched out, his translucent wings were formed with multicolored, scalelike feathers that glistened in the sunlight like transparent rainbows).

“He spoke to the Woman: ‘Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?’ ” (Genesis 3:1, *The Message*). As a master manipulator, Satan lured Eve into a conversation. She defended God: “Not at all. We can eat from the trees in the garden. It’s only about the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘Don’t eat from it; don’t even touch it or you’ll die’ ” (Genesis 3:2, 3, *The Message*). “The serpent told the Woman, ‘You won’t die’ ” (Genesis 3:4, *The Message*). In other words, “You don’t need God for life.”

Satan indirectly accused God of lying. The tempter knew that he could not rip Adam and Eve from God’s protection; they must choose him over God (Genesis 3:5). He vilified God as jealously suppressing their potential because He feared they would become His equal. Satan masks himself as their “savior,” empowering them to become the “gods” they were destined to be.

Sin’s allurement

If sin did not have a promised reward, we would never choose it. Satan baits the hook, promising exhilarating happiness, an exalted position, or a new state of freedom. He lies—his native language—like the stereotypical used-car salesman, saying whatever will get us to buy the product. Sin never delivers what it promises; even its pleasure lasts only a short season (Hebrews 11:25).

Satan gives away the first hit of sin like a corner drug pusher giving out free samples, never intimating the addiction that allows him, as their dealer, to own them. They will give up their morals, lose their dreams, betray their loved ones, and literally sell their souls for this quick fix. So often we fall for the same lines. He gives the lure of the drinking party but doesn’t allude to hugging the toilet the next morning. He promises physical pleasure for the playboy lifestyle but doesn’t reference the empty loneliness of sex without committed love, the devastating diagnosis of HIV, or the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy. He lures us with material wealth but doesn’t disclose the empty lives of those who have already reached the top.

Sin has a hook, not just the death at the end of our lives but lives riddled with pain. Satan misrepresented God to Adam and Eve as withholding the good life. He denied the painful consequences of acting against God. He promised special pleasure from sin. Even with all that humanity has been through, we still buy into the lie that sin will not harm us.

I have always dreamed of flying—really flying—unaided by some mechanical device. Standing on top of a sixty-four-story building, the urge comes over me to jump and experience the exhilaration of flying through the air. Knowing the consequential *splat* that waits at the bottom prevents me from jumping. Those few seconds of pleasure don’t outweigh the consequences of the indulgence. The recognition of more pain than gain disarms the power of the temptation.

Distrust: The core of sin

Distrust in God constitutes the core issue of sin. We commit adultery because we don't believe God that fidelity to our spouse will ultimately bring our greatest happiness. We steal because we don't believe that God will provide for us. We worship other gods because we don't trust Yahweh to be God enough to handle our lives. We covet what our neighbor has, not trusting that God has *our* best in mind. All sin comes because we distrust God.

When Adam and Eve did not exercise faith or trust in God, they sinned. "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23, ESV). They relied on their own wisdom, informed by Satan. "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6).

The serpent beguiles Eve, but Adam makes his choice with full knowledge of his actions. What thought process would allow him to betray his God? Realizing Eve had rejected God, did he fear that God might destroy her, leaving him alone? Did he put her before God? The real issue was that he didn't trust that God was big enough to work things out for his good.

Why didn't he talk to God about his problem first? If he had trusted God, what might have been the results? Would God still have died for Eve and given her life? Then would He have returned her to faithful Adam to nurture as his wife? Would Adam have remained the head of an unfallen race? Or would God have created a new wife for Adam? Our answers would amount to speculation. The point remains that even after Eve sinned, Adam could have trusted God and remained faithful, but instead he fell for Satan's trap.

Thinking they would rule their own lives as gods, they took the throne. They not only sinned, they became sinful by nature. They lived with the three S's on the throne: Satan, Sin, and Self.

LOW GAME: The result of a broken relationship

I will illustrate the result of a broken relationship with God with the acronym LOW GAME:

- They experienced *Loneliness*: they missed God as their companion.
- They were *Outcasts*: they could not remain in God's presence.
- They felt *Worthless*: their value had been in their connection with God.
- They knew *Guilt*: they had disobeyed God.
- They felt deep *Anxiety*: God no longer protected them.
- They knew *Meaninglessness*: their purpose had been to commune with and serve God.
- They felt *Empty*: no matter what else we use to try to fill it, a spot remains empty that only God can fill.

The results of the loss of a love connection with God caused mankind to seek for love outside of God's will. A sinful nature resulting from a broken connection with God produced sins. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV). Sinful actions come from a sinful nature just as sure as lemons come from a lemon tree.

Missing God—the source of love—we desperately spin out of control. People search for love through adultery, fornication, pedophilia, and homosexuality. Gangs gather kids

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who want to belong and be loved. Some give up on love and act out in hate. Others turn to drinking and drugs to escape the guilt of living apart from God. Some seek to make themselves more loveable by obtaining things or position.

The corporate head

Adam and Eve's sin affected all mankind. "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19).

Adam filled the role of mankind's corporate representative. When he chose to separate himself from God by disobedience, he placed the entire race under bondage to Satan. The Western world's strong emphasis on individuality makes understanding corporate representation difficult. Middle Eastern culture stresses interdependence. One person's action reflects on the whole community. The choices of the head of the family affect his entire progeny. In our country, if the president decides to go into war, the nation is at war whether or not we individually agree with his choice.

Because of our heredity and this law of corporate representation, at birth we receive a selfish nature, one under Satan's rule. Before the American Civil War, people born into slavery became the property of their parents' master. The master didn't need to purchase them; they were automatically his slaves. Similarly, because of the choice made by Adam and Eve, we were born enslaved to Satan.

We are "by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Ephesians 2:3). Not just our actions fall under God's wrath but our very being. David admitted this, saying, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). In our selfish nature, we turn to our own way (Isaiah 53:6), and we perform sinful acts.

Can we choose to be good?

So can we just choose to act contrary to our nature? Can we muster up willpower and become better men and women? "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jeremiah 13:23).

God answers a resounding No! Even the best we have to offer on our own power will be less than nothing. "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isaiah 64:6). The full meaning of this text hit me when a professor shared with me that the Hebrew word for "filthy rag" refers specifically to a menstrual rag—bloody, disgusting, and foul.

Imagine a disappointed lemon tree trying to become an apple tree by cutting off its sour lemons and hanging sweet apples in their place. The apples will rot off and more lemons will grow back. Try as it might, the lemon tree can only produce those sour little fruits. In the same way, the end consequence of our nature is death (Romans 6:23). Sin reigns in our natural body (Romans 6:12).

God wants us back

God desires *everyone* to be saved. He does not wish “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9; see also 1 Timothy 2:3, 4). From the beginning, He has not withheld anything that was for our good, but He has been misrepresented as desiring to destroy us.

Instead, as Moses found out, the Lord God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations” (Exodus 34:6, 7). Sin creates a separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:2).

How can a holy, righteous, and pure God also love, forgive, and care for sinners? Our compassionate Lord found a way to meet the challenge of maintaining both mercy and justice. He could not ignore the choice Adam and Eve had made.

Satan thought he had God: if God chose to let Adam and Eve go free, He would defy His own law. Satan’s charge that God’s law was arbitrary would be substantiated. Then Satan, too, would have to be allowed access to heaven. Or if God decided to act in justice, He would have to destroy His own children. This would be a devastating blow to a God of love.

But God had an answer that would allow Him to be both merciful and just. He could not ignore Adam and Eve’s choice of Satan, sin, and death. But He provided them with another choice. They could accept the Son of God’s death in their place. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16, KJV). How would this work?

A second Adam

God would create a second Adam in Jesus, another corporate head of mankind (Romans 5:14). He was born connected with God through the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:20). His purpose as Adam II was to restore what the first Adam’s fall had lost.

Jesus came to free us from the slavery of Satan so that we too might live in freedom from sin (Romans 8:12, 13). “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, 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” (Hebrews 2:14, 15). God planned not just to pay a price for sin but to free us from Satan’s captivity. First John 3:4 says, “Sin is lawlessness.” Jesus came “to take away sins” and “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:5, 8). How would Jesus deal with man’s captivity to Satan? He would ransom us, just as today someone might ransom a child from a kidnapper.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted on the same grounds that the first Adam fell (Matthew 4:1–10). In each temptation, Satan tempted Jesus to distrust His heavenly Father. He wanted Jesus to use His divine powers to meet His own need, instead of relying on the Father’s plan, timing, and power (Romans 5:19). Jesus came through as a conqueror. Adam II trusts God.

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Satan had no claim on Jesus' life. "The ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me" (John 14:30). Clearly, God reigned on the throne of Jesus' life.

The choice to stay connected to God resulted in the only victorious, sinless human life. The fruit of the Spirit was perfectly reflected in His life (Galatians 5:22, 23). Just as a lemon tree produces lemons, an apple tree produces apples. Jesus chose to stay connected with the Father and produced the apple fruit of righteousness.

Such a life connected with God the Father results in eternal life. Christ's life was an example of victory. As the corporate head for all mankind, He lived righteously.

The great exchange

The problem remains—you and I are born with the first Adam's nature, not the Second Adam's. How can we gain access to His eternal life?

God provided a way. He moved in like a hostage negotiator in a kidnapping. Jesus made freeing us His first priority. God ransoms us "from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19, ESV). Jesus stepped in and exchanged His life that we might go free. Some translations use the term *redeemed* instead of *ransomed*. We redeem a coupon by exchanging it for the purchased item. Jesus exchanged His righteous human life for ours. He gave us a new choice, the choice to accept His death for ours.

Jesus our Savior saves us *from* our sin, not *in* our sin. He frees us from having Satan, sin, and self in the control seat of our lives and allows us to place God in the control seat of our lives.

The cross forms the bridge that connects us to the perfect life of Jesus Christ, the Second Adam and our Savior. The cross makes the great exchange possible. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus as Savior and Lord

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross does not just free us from sin's penalty. Adam II becomes our family head, placing God on the control seat of our lives. We cannot accept Jesus' work as Savior without also accepting Him as Lord.

Accepting His work of justification and sanctification means not only accepting what Jesus has done for us but also what He does in us. Much of Christendom accepts Jesus as Savior, accepting what He did in laying down His life for them, without accepting Him as Lord and allowing Him to rule. They live believing Jesus gives them eternal life ultimately but that practically Satan still controls their lives.

The process of moving from a life with Satan in control to a life with Jesus in control we call being *born again*. The very term reveals our first birth as inadequate (John 3:3). The rebirth concept made complete sense to the Jews offering salvation to Gentiles. Proselytes entered the Jewish faith through baptism symbolizing their rebirth as a Jew.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. He wanted him to know that a heart rebirth was necessary in order to belong to God—meaning Jesus must reign in the heart.

God also described the process of conversion as when He removes the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). The change from a nature where Satan, sin, and self are on the throne to God being in the control seat of the life is also referred to as becoming a *new creature* or *creation*. “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17)! We have a new Master. The love of God controls us instead of the selfish desires of the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:14).

The fruit of God on the throne

Fruit naturally comes from connecting with Jesus like branches connect to the vine (John 15). Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. The change of the heart from a lemon tree to an apple tree produces apples, not lemons.

When a king comes and takes over the land of a hostile dictator, the land takes a while to reflect the king’s rule and for it to filter into every aspect of life. God places the former dictator behind bars and takes away his power (Romans 6:6). Young’s Literal Translation of this verse says, “Knowing, that our old man was crucified with [him], that the body of the sin may be made useless, for our no longer serving the sin.” The International Standard Version says, “We know that our old natures were crucified with him so that our sin-laden bodies might be rendered powerless and we might no longer be slaves to sin.”

Our old nature resists being locked up, so Satan, drawing on the old man within us, takes his little metal cup and runs it against the bars, doing what I call the “jailhouse rock” of temptation. He reminds us of the pleasures of sin—baiting the hook. We decide whether we will trust him or trust Jesus. If we resist, he flees, growing weaker, and his influence on us becomes less and less (James 4:7). The nature that we feed, and allow to exercise in our life, grows strongest.

Saving faith

Our part in salvation goes beyond a belief that consists of intellectual consent—even demons believe (James 2:19). With saving faith, I surrender my life to God’s reign. In order to trust people, I have to first believe that they *care* about me and have my good in mind. Second, I must know they *can* accomplish the work necessary for my good.

In order for me to trust God I have to know that He both wants the best for my life and He is able to make that best happen! I build that trust the same way I build trust in my human relationships. I watch how He treats others. I look for His character traits and their consistency.

I learn from the Bible and Christians’ testimonies how God treats people. The psalmist states, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11). Little by little I turn over the things in my life, and I watch how God handles them. And when I find Him to be absolutely trustworthy, I give Him not just parts of my life but my life itself. And after knowing Him for these many years I find Him—the God beyond my wildest dreams.

Thoughts to Ponder

1. How does this description of salvation differ from others that I have heard?

2. What sort of tree does my "fruit" indicate? Have I tried to tie on fruit instead of having my tree trunk changed?

3. Have I judged the sin of others as worse than my own? Can I see others through a new light, realizing sins are an individual's search for the lost love of God inside?

4. Does viewing salvation from this perspective give me a different view of the character of God? How do I understand righteousness by faith?

5. In what actions do I invite the old man back on the throne of my heart? Have I accepted Jesus as both Lord and Savior?
