



Full product can be ordered by calling
1-800-333-8300 or by visiting
www.FaithAliveResources.org

show me 

sample

Faith Alive Christian Resources

Property of Faith Alive Christian Resources. All rights reserved.

Alfred E. Mulder

CHRISTIAN



What It Means • Why It Matters

Alfred E. Mulder

CHRISTIAN

What It Means • Why It Matters



Grand Rapids, Michigan

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this publication are from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version. © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission.

Christian: What It Means, Why It Matters, © 2007, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49560. All rights reserved. With the exception of brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher. Printed in the United States of America on recycled paper.

We welcome your comments. Call us at 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at editors@faithaliveresources.org.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mulder, Alfred E., 1936-

Christian: what it means, why it matters/
Alfred E. Mulder.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59255-292-4 (alk. paper)

1. Theology, Doctrinal—Popular works.

2. Reformed Church—Doctrines. I. Title

BT77.M874 2007

230—dc22

2006102849

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction: The Name “Christian”	5
<i>“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” —Acts 11:26b</i>	
Chapter 1: The God We Can Know	11
<i>“In the beginning God created . . .” —Genesis 1:1</i>	
<i>“He rewards those who earnestly seek him.” —Hebrews 11:6</i>	
Chapter 2: Name Above All Names	25
<i>“There is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” —Acts 4:12</i>	
<i>“I will . . . write on them my new name.” —Revelation 3:12b</i>	
Chapter 3: Spirit of God, Welcome!	41
<i>“Be filled with the Spirit. . . .” —Ephesians 5:18b</i>	
<i>“Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” —1 Thessalonians 5:19</i>	
Chapter 4: Living as Christians—Together	55
<i>“So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” —Romans 12:5</i>	
Appendix A: The Apostles’ Creed	69
Appendix B: Jesus Christ, the Promised One.	71
Appendix C: Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Service.	75
Appendix D: Names for God the Spirit	79
Appendix E: Profession of Faith.	81
Appendix F: The Lord’s Supper.	85
Appendix G: “One Another”	87

INTRODUCTION

The Name “Christian”

“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”—Acts 11:26

The radio show host asked Don to defend Christianity.

Don, a Christian, refused. When the surprised host asked why, Don explained: “Stop ten people on the street and ask them what they think of when they hear the word *Christianity*, and they will give you ten different answers. How can I defend a term that means ten different things to ten different people?”

Then Don surprised his host again: “I would rather talk about Jesus, and how I came to believe that Jesus exists and that he likes me” (Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, p. 115).

Speaking of Jesus

Jesus is a big deal!

Consider this: Western historians date all world events in relation to the year of Jesus’ birth. King David, for example, was born prior to 1000 B.C.—that is, more than 1,000 years *before Christ*. Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem a little over 2,000 years ago, in the year zero.

(Historians now believe that Jesus likely was born earlier than first estimated, probably in 4 B.C.) Martin Luther King Jr. was born in the year A.D. 1929, or 1,929 years after the birth of Christ. The same kind of arithmetic works with your birthday. The birth of Jesus divides history!

WORD ALERT

The letters B.C. refer to *before Christ*. The letters A.D. are initials for the Latin words *anno Domini*, translated in English as “the year of our Lord”—referring to Jesus Christ. Interestingly, many historians now use the letters B.C.E (Before Common Era) instead of A.D.

Another name for Jesus is the name *Christ*. *Christianity* and *Christian* therefore are about Christ.

Some people call the United States a Christian nation. Some people write Christian books. Some children go to Christian schools. Christianity, however, is not first of all a national religion, or a system of thought, or even a way of learning and living. Christianity is about having a faith relationship with the God of the universe. And God’s face in this relationship is Jesus.

So who or what is a *Christian*? A Christian is a person whose life is wrapped up in Jesus. A Christian is a Jesus-follower.

Speaking of “Christian”

The word *Christian* is mentioned only three times in the Bible, but each mention adds to the meaning of this wonderful word.

The first time the term is used is in the book of Acts: “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch” (11:26b).

People began following Jesus around A.D. 30. The name *Christian* was first introduced perhaps five years later. Why then?

Up to this point, following Jesus was a Jewish thing. Jesus was a Jew, and all his followers were Jews. At that time there was a huge religious and social divide between Jews and everyone else. But in Antioch an incredible thing happened. Jews who believed in Jesus began telling Greeks about Jesus, and Greeks started following Jesus too. What brought them together, the common denominator, was a shared love for Jesus Christ. Together they were (and are) *Christ-ians!*

A little later in Acts (26:28) comes the second mention of the word *Christian*: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

A bold Jesus-follower challenged the governor-king to become a Christian. The governor-king seemed to realize that following Jesus would involve a major life change, and that he would have to make a choice. The governor was right, of course. Where he was wrong was in deciding to put it off. He didn’t realize that not deciding is a decision in itself.

The third and final mention of *Christian* comes in 1 Peter 4:16: “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

Although following Jesus involves many great benefits, it does not guarantee a trouble-free life. Sometimes, identifying with Christ—or “bearing the name”—seems to *invite* negative response. This can range from mild ridicule to fearing for our lives. Whatever consequences you might experience because you are a Christian, “do not be ashamed, but praise God.” The joy

IN OTHER WORDS

“[Jesus’] purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. . . .”

—Ephesians 2:15b

IN OTHER WORDS

“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

—2 Corinthians 5:17

and peace of loving and living for Jesus make it all worthwhile!

Speaking of This Book

This book introduces the reader to what it means to be a Christian, and why it matters. It does so in plain language, explaining words and terms that may be unfamiliar.

WORD ALERT

A “confession” is a summary statement of the Christian faith that was written and approved by Christian churches and leaders for teaching purposes.

Throughout the book, “what it means and why it matters” is connected continually with examples and quotations from the Bible. The chapters also include related statements from Christian leaders and church confessions, and they include suggested questions for reflection and discussion.

This book is for you if

- you want to learn what it means and why it matters to be a Christian.
- you are a new Christian and desire to grow in what you believe and how you live.
- you are a Christian and need a “tool” to help a family member or friend become a Christian.
- you want to prepare for professing your faith in Christ and for receiving Christian baptism.
- you are a Christian leader who helps newer Christians prepare for professing their faith in Christ and for receiving Christian baptism.
- you and a group of Christians want to review together the basics of what it means to be a Christian and why it matters.

This book includes the following four chapters:

- *Chapter 1: The God We Can Know.* As God reveals himself to human beings, we learn many great things about him as the Father, and we are shown our desperate need for God.
- *Chapter 2: Name Above All Names.* We understand Jesus Christ better by learning the meaning and importance of his many names, and by embracing him as Savior and Lord.
- *Chapter 3: Spirit of God, Welcome!* God the Spirit desires to occupy our inner space, to make our faith in Jesus personal and real, and to give us the power we need to live as Christians.
- *Chapter 4: Living as Christians—Together.* We learn and grow by joining with other Jesus-followers, doing what Christians do, and loving and serving God and one another as family forever.

A Personal Word

In all my years of reading and teaching the Bible, I find great comfort in this simple statement: “Being confident of this, that [God] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). It is my sincere and heartfelt prayer that each of you will come to know this confidence in God!

While writing this book I thought a lot about my ten grandchildren: Joni and Daryl; Angela, Al, and Senovio; Bronson, Crystal, and

IN OTHER WORDS

A favorite person in my life was a young woman, maybe twenty years old at the time, whose name I cannot remember. At half her age, I knew what it meant to be a Christian. But God used this young woman to convince me how much it mattered. With her help, I promised to follow Jesus all of my days.

SING IT

The grace that kept me safe
will keep me all the way
The work that God began in
me
he will complete some day.
Hallelujah!

—Alfred E. Mulder,
© 1996

Brandon; Cassandra and Curtis. To you, dear grandchildren, I dedicate this book. Honor me by reading it carefully and prayerfully. And I will continue to pray that as you grow in faith and love, Jesus will be the joy of your life—as he is of mine.

The God We Can Know

“In the beginning God created . . .”
—Genesis 1:1

“He rewards those who earnestly seek him.”
—Hebrews 11:6

Can We Talk?

We say this to each other. Every once in a while we need time to talk: to express a concern, to ask a question, to share some good news.

When I ask to speak with someone, I believe three things:

- that I am speaking with a real person; that this person exists.
- that this person is able to communicate—he or she can hear and can respond.
- that at some level this person is willing to be in relationship with me.

It’s like that with God and us.

The only way we can meaningfully talk about God and faith in God is to believe—if only for the sake of argument—that God does in fact exist. Even if we are not sure where the conversation is going to take us, we have to believe

IN OTHER WORDS

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. . . . And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

—Hebrews 11:1, 6

WORD ALERT

Demons are evil spirits who oppose God and his purposes, in contrast to angels who are good spirits and always support God’s good purposes.

IN OTHER WORDS

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”

—Romans 1:20

there are things we can know about God. And even if we know nothing or next to nothing about God, we start asking questions in the hope that God is interested in us, that he wants a relationship with us.

As a rule of thumb the words *faith* and *belief* can be used interchangeably. One exception, as the Bible cautions, is that the demons, God’s opponents, also believe that he exists, but are terrified (James 2:19). Here’s the bottom line: God’s opponents believe *that* God exists, but Christians believe *in* God. Christians believe in God as a Person whom we can both know and trust.

For the purposes of this book, to *believe in God* and to *have faith in God* have the same meaning.

How Can We Know?

Knowing God comes down to a matter of faith. Believing that God exists is a growing certainty that I cannot explain. I simply know it more than I don’t know it. An ancient teacher thought of it as God setting “eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11). A famous church leader, John Calvin, taught that we are created with *a sense of the divine*. Some voice inside of us tells us that God is real. Somehow God moves us to believe in him. We just know!

While the path to believing is mysterious, this does not mean that faith is unreasonable. As a matter of fact, I also think, along with many scientists and philosophers, that it is more reasonable to believe in God than not to believe in God.

The World Teaches Us About God

I challenge you to explore the wonders of outer space, then deny the existence of a Higher Power. Or drink in the wonder of a double rainbow, and keep on believing those things “just happen.” Or witness the birth of a baby, and wonder whether there is a Creator. Ponder the miracles of hearing and seeing and talking and breathing and digesting, and try to convince me there is no intelligent Designer.

Over the centuries, generation after generation, people are convinced that *truly seeing* the world as we know it can lead to only one conclusion: there is a God.

When John Glenn, the first United States orbiting astronaut, returned from his history-making flight into space, he said, “Could this world and universe have just happened? Was it an accident that a bunch of flotsam and jetsam suddenly started making orbits of its own accord? I can’t believe that. This was a definite plan. This is the one big thing in space that shows me there is a God. Some Power put all this into orbit and keeps it there.”

The Bible Teaches Us About God

The Bible is often referred to as the Word of God.

But from one perspective, the Bible is a very human product. It was developed over two thousand years, and contains a very unusual combination of 66 different “books”—history, poetry, prophecy, and letters. The first 39 books were written in the Hebrew language, and are known as the Old Testament. The last 27 books

IN OTHER WORDS

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

—Psalm 19:1-4

IN OTHER WORDS

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush
afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes
off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and
pluck blackberries.
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

CONFESS IT

God formed the land, the sky, and the seas, making the earth a fitting home for the plants, animals, and humans he created. The world was filled with color; beauty, and variety; it provided room for work and play, worship and service, love and laughter. God rested—and gave us rest. In the beginning everything was good.

—*Our World Belongs to God*, stanza 9 (Available online at www.crcna.org/pages/our_world_main.cfm)

WORD ALERT

The word *testament*, when used of the two parts of the Bible, means covenant, or promise. God's original promise to save the world and its people was given to Abraham and Moses and others. That's called the old covenant. God's promise is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who has established a new covenant based on the old.

All of the books in the Bible written *prior* to the time of Jesus are said to be in the Old Testament; all books in the Bible written *after* the time of Jesus make up the New Testament.

"The New is in the Old contained;
The Old is by the New explained."

WORD ALERT

Scripture means "writings" or "sacred writings."

were written in Greek, and are called—you guessed it—the New Testament. What's more, they were written by people with a wide array of experiences: national leaders, historians, a shepherd-king, musicians, religious holy men, a tax collector, fishermen, a physician, and—the most prominent of all—a former Christian-killer.

However, the Bible also is much more than a human product. Despite all its human fingerprints, the Bible—from beginning to end—is a reliable story about God and God's dealings with the world. This book about God came into existence only because God, by his own mysterious influence, guided the writers and even preserved their writings in such a way that this entire book is the holy and inspired Word of God.

The apostle Paul summed it up this way: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

As the Sunday school teacher walked among her class she asked Jimmie, "What are you drawing?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," he said. "But nobody knows what God looks like," she cautioned. Jimmie replied confidently: "They will now!"

Sorry, Jimmie, we do *not* know what God looks like. However, there are many important things about God that we *do* know—because the Bible tells us so. Let's take a longer look at some great realities about God.

God Is Personal

God establishes a relationship with human beings.

In the final stage of creation—what the Bible calls “the sixth day”—God proceeded to create human beings with this comment: “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness. . . . So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26a, 27).

And, as the saying goes, the rest is history!

From Day One, God chose to be in relationship with human beings. Consider these examples. He spent time with Adam and Eve in the beautiful new world. Their children made religious sacrifices to him (Gen. 3). God made agreements with Noah the ark-builder (Gen. 9) and with Abraham the nation-builder (Gen. 17). One of the Bible’s song writers compared God to a bird who protects her young under her wings (Ps. 91:4), and to a father who has compassion for his children (Ps. 103:13). God compared himself to a shepherd who gathers lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart (Isa. 40:11). In other words, God loves the creatures he made in his image!

God is relational within himself.

God wants us to know that he is *one*. “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). The Bible makes this point repeatedly, down to the last of the Old Testament voices: “Did not one God create us?” (Mal. 2:10). Yes, God is one!

But look again at what God said before creating human beings: “Let *us* make human beings in

WORD ALERT

Image or likeness does not refer to our physical appearance, but rather to our God-given ability to think, to know right from wrong, and to live in spiritual relationship with God our Creator.

WORD ALERT

Sacrifice is a sacred or holy act performed in honor to a deity. One son of Adam and Eve gave a gift of grain, the other a lamb. Later we’ll discuss the greatest sacrifice of all.

CONFESS IT

God has not left this world without ways of knowing him.

He shows his power and majesty in the creation; he has mercifully spoken through prophets, history writers, poets, gospel writers, and apostles—and most clearly through the Son. The Spirit who moved humans to write the Word of God speaks to us in the Bible.

—*Our World Belongs to God*, stanza 34

IN OTHER WORDS

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. . . .

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. . . .

As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

—Psalm 103:8, 11, 13

SING IT

I have a Maker
He formed my heart
Before even time began
My life was in his hands.
*He knows my name.
He knows my every thought.
He sees each tear that falls.
And he hears me when I call.*
I have a Father
He calls me his own.
He'll never leave me,
No matter where I go.

—Tommy Walker,

© 1996, Doulos Publishing
BMI (Admin. by Music
Services). All rights
reserved. Used by
permission.

our image, in *our* likeness” (italics added, Gen. 1:26a). With whom is God speaking? Why would God use plural pronouns to describe a conversation with himself?

Could it be that the God who is *one* also is *more than one*? As a matter of fact, this is exactly what we learn from the Bible about God.

God the Father. Isaiah, a big-name Old Testament prophet, described God as Father: “You, LORD, are our Father . . .” (Isa. 63:16b). In the New Testament, Jesus took it a step further by teaching us to actually address God *as* Father, “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven . . .’” (Matt. 6:9).

God the Son. Long before Jesus was born Isaiah predicted: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14), which, as Matthew explained, means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23b). And when the time finally came, no less than an angel told a young virgin woman named Mary: “The power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). One time, when Jesus asked his followers who they thought he was, one called him “the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Later one known as a doubter blurted out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28).

God the Holy Spirit. Before the creation of the world the Spirit of God “hovered over the waters” (Gen. 1:2). Over many centuries, as we noted earlier, the writers of the Bible “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). Each spring the Spirit

of God “renew[s] the face of the ground” (Ps. 104:30). And every day, with our Bibles in hand, the Holy Spirit continues to lead us into a more complete understanding of all God’s truth (see John 16:13).

God is one; God is three. God is one being in three persons.

Eventually the Christian church created language for this mystery: God is *tri* (three)-*une* (one), or *tri-unity*. From this Christians coined the term *Trinity*.

God is personal and relational in his very being! “Even before he created us, there was a perfect relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. God did not need to create us in order to have someone to relate to, because he already had the perfect relationship in the Trinity. Our ability to relate to one another and to enjoy our relationship with God grows out of his relational nature” (Tom Holladay and Kay Warren, *Foundations*, Zondervan, 2003, p. 44).

IN OTHER WORDS

As a child and far into my adulthood, I had a strong and loving earthly father. Not perfect, but pretty good!

Good enough to prompt very positive thoughts about the image of God as *Father*. The Bible describes God as *Father* in at least three different ways:

God is Father of the created world.

“There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live . . .” (1 Cor. 8:6a).

God is the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ.

“For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26).

God is the Father of human beings.

“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Eph. 3:14-15).

IN OTHER WORDS

“May the grace of the Lord
Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit
be with you all.”

—2 Corinthians 13:14

CONFESS IT

“I believe in God, the Father
almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.”
—Apostles’ Creed, Article I
(Note: also see Appendix A,
“The Apostles’ Creed”)

SING IT

This is my Father’s world:
O let me ne’er forget
that though the wrong
seems oft so strong,
God is the ruler yet.
—Maltbie D. Babcock

CONFESS IT

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD
God directs and bends to his
will
all that happens in his world.
As history unfolds in ways
we only know in part,
all things—
from crops to grades,
from jobs to laws—
are under his control.
God is present in our world
by his Word and Spirit.
The faithfulness
of our great Provider
gives sense to our days
and hope to our years.
The future is secure,
for our world belongs to
God.
—*Our World Belongs
to God*, stanza 13

God Is Powerful

God is the Creator of all.

“This is what the Lord says . . . ‘It is I who made
the earth and created human beings on it. My
own hands stretched out the heavens; I mar-
shaled their starry hosts’” (Isa. 45:11a, 12).

God is Ruler over all.

“Are you not the God who is in heaven? You
rule over all the kingdoms of the nations”
(2 Chron. 20:6a).

“With God all things are possible” (Matt.
19:26b).

God knows and understands everything.

“Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his
understanding has no limit” (Ps. 147:5).

God is the Provider of all

“The God who made the world and everything
in it is the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . And he
is not served by human hands, as if he needed
anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life
and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24a-25).

God Is Perfect

Here are some of the many “perfections” of God. Match one word with each of the following statements about God in the Bible. (See the correct matches below.)

Good	Holy
Knows all	Loving
Patient	Present everywhere
Invisible	Timeless

1. _____ “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps. 90:2).
2. _____ “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely” (Ps. 139:1, 4).
3. _____ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone” (Mark 10:18).
4. _____ “One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6).
5. _____ “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).
6. _____ “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).
7. _____ “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love” (1 John 4:16a).
8. _____ “Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy” (Rev. 15:4a).

IN OTHER WORDS

May I know Thee more
clearly,
Love Thee more dearly,
Follow Thee more nearly,
Day by day. Amen.

—Richard of Chichester,
1197-1253

1. Timeless; 2. Knows all; 3. Good; 4. Present everywhere; 5. Patient; 6. Invisible;
7. Loving; 8. Holy

The Bible Teaches Us About Human Beings

Good News

The Bible has a lot of good news about human beings.

The creation story reports that we were made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This is not talking about physical resemblance, but about our real nature. God gave human beings an *intellect*—to know, to grow, and to teach. We are *spiritual*, designed by our Creator to live forever. God created us as *moral* beings to know right from wrong.

God also made us *accountable* for the world in which he placed us: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). He instructed our first parents to rule over—that is, to be responsible for—all other kinds of life in the world. He invited us to feed ourselves from the fruit of the land. He made us his stewards—his representatives on the earth. According to the ancient song writer, God made us only “a little lower than the heavenly beings” (Ps. 8:5).

CONFESS IT

As God’s creatures we are
made in his image
to represent him here on
earth,
and to live in communion
with him.
By sovereign appointment
we are
earthkeepers and caretakers:
loving our neighbor,
tending the creation,
and meeting our needs.
God uses our skills
in the unfolding and well-
being of his world.
—*Our World Belongs*
to God, stanza 10

IN OTHER WORDS

“You created my inmost
being;
you knit me together in my
mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am
fearfully and wonderfully
made.”
—Psalm 139:13-14a

For a while at least—we don’t know how long—our earliest ancestors totally enjoyed their life together. They delighted in the presence of their Creator, they delighted in the beauty and bounty of the garden, and they delighted in one another—naked and without shame (see Gen. 2:25).

Bad News

But something went very wrong.

God made certain rules for his new world. He's God, right? So just as he established boundaries between land and sea, and universe-laws such as gravity and seasonal changes, God made rules to govern humans living in the garden. One of these rules was "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden" (Gen. 3:3a). Eating from any other tree was OK; just not from the one in the middle!

As the Bible tells us (see Gen. 3), an evil voice appeared from nowhere in the form of a snake. Unbelievably, it talked Eve into tasting the fruit of that middle tree, the one thing God had told her *not* to do. And as smoothly as passing a baton in a relay race, Eve offered the bait to Adam and he took it too. No sooner had they swallowed it than this awful awareness crept over them: "The eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked . . ." (Gen. 3:7a).

From this day forward, human beings were and are damaged goods. Our first parents' disobedience opened the floodgates—shame, lying, blaming, separation, pain, thorns and thistles, jealousy, anger, murder, restlessness, fearfulness . . . and eventually death!

The result is deadly: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, . . . in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12). At a particularly low point in his life, King David made it personal: "Surely I was sinful at birth,

IN OTHER WORDS

"I knew, because of my own feelings, there was something wrong with me, and I knew it wasn't only me. I knew it was everybody. It was like a bacteria or a cancer or a trance. It wasn't on the skin; it was in the soul. It showed itself in loneliness, lust, anger, jealousy, and depression. It had people screwed up bad everywhere you went—at the store, at home, at church; it was ugly and deep. Lots of singers on the radio were singing about it, and cops had jobs because of it. It was as if we were broken, I thought. . . . It was as if we were cracked, couldn't love right, couldn't feel good things for very long without screwing it all up. . . ."

—Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, Thomas Nelson, 2003, page 14

IN OTHER WORDS

“It’s not just particular acts or thoughts that are now corrupt. It’s our whole nature. We’re born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a born athlete. Sin is what we do. It’s not only that we’re sinners because we sin; it’s also that we sin because we’re sinners. And it’s not just some of us. It’s the whole race. . . . This drum roll of disaster has never been fixed by human hands. Who in heaven’s name can save us?”

—Cornelius Plantinga Jr.
Calvin Theological Seminary
Forum, Fall 2006

sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). The verdict is the same for each of us: “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:22b-23).

We need help—big time!

CONFESS IT

Apart from grace
we prove each day
that we are guilty sinners.
Fallen in that first sin,
we fail to thank God,
we break his laws,
we ignore our tasks.
Looking for life without God,
we find only death;
grasping for freedom outside
his law,
we trap ourselves in Satan’s
snares;
pursuing pleasure,
we lose the gift of joy.

—*Our World Belongs
to God*, stanza 15

Points to Ponder

1. Name some things about our world and us as human beings (see p. 13) that make it difficult to believe in God. At the same time, what are some things that make it difficult *not* to believe in God?
2. The Bible tells us that “all scripture is God-breathed” and that the Bible writers were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (see pp. 13-14). What do you think this means? What difference does it make?
3. Why do you suppose God would want us to know that he is personal (see pp. 15-16)? How might this affect our relationship with God?
4. “God is one; God is three. God is one being in three persons” (see p. 17). What kind of pictures or ideas come to mind? In what way are these comparisons not adequate?
5. One of the ways God describes himself is as a Father (see pp. 16-17). In what ways does our experience of human fathers help or hinder our view of God? What does our experience with our earthly fathers suggest about ourselves?
6. Human beings are created “in the image and likeness of God” (see p. 20). In what ways are we like God? In what ways do we blur or distort the image of God in us?
7. Donald Miller writes, “I knew there was something wrong with me.” The Bible calls this “sin.” Are we sinners by nature or by nurture? Explain and support your position.