

Core
Christianity

How to Keep Your Faith After High School

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How to Keep Your Faith After High School
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INTRODUCTION

A Confession

I need to start this booklet with a confession: I didn't keep my faith after high school. I grew up in the church—memorized Bible verses, knew the Sunday school stories, and participated in Christian clubs, camps, and youth groups. But it didn't stick. I floundered through college and, eventually, walked away from Jesus altogether.

In some ways, that makes me the wrong person to write this. I can't share the wisdom of a positive experience; what follows is mostly hypothetical. As I reflect on where my drift began and the struggles that preceded and followed, I've developed some working theories about how things could have been different.

But I hope my negative experience can lend a different kind of wisdom. Let me illustrate why.

I'm from North Dakota, where the landscape is generally flat, aside from the manmade hills of highway overpasses. And in the warmer months (of which there are just a few), the thick air of summer often gives way to epic thunderstorms and torrential rains. This combination leads to our own version of flash flooding. The water pools at major intersections, forming a temporary lake that hides the roads going onto or over the interstate. Big pickups just keep going, confident their vehicle's engine sits high enough to get through the waters without issue. But smaller cars linger when the light is green, trying to gauge how deep it is, wondering which brave soul will go first.

The few times I've observed this phenomenon, I've marveled at another: Without fail, there are multiple cars stalled in the middle of the intersection. Same-sized sedans sit side-by-side, their engines flooded, and their drivers stranded.

One car I could understand. I might even give that driver a wave of gratitude for being the pioneer willing to see if it's safe for the rest of us. *It's not*, they call back, sacrificing themselves so we can choose a different route and make it home in time for dinner.

But what I can't understand are the multiple cars sitting there—the ones who looked at the failed attempt, assessed their own vehicle, and plowed forward. *Yes, we're the same*, they thought, *but for me, it will be different*. I imagine that first stalled driver trying to wave them back. *You won't make it!* they try to warn. *Go another way!*

Oh, how I would love to be the car sitting where you are now, hovering at the green light, deciding which path to choose. But instead, I write these words having abandoned my vehicle in the intersection. I imagine myself trying to wave you off, maybe putting up a barricade, pleading: *Go another way!*

I might not be able to say from experience what works, but I can sure tell you what doesn't. I rejoice in the Lord's kindness to draw me back to himself, and I'm grateful for the ways he's allowed me to experience his grace and mercy, healing and restoration. But I wish I could take back those lost years. I wouldn't wish them on anyone. So, if I can write anything to help keep you from stalling, I must at least try. If nothing else, I hope this short booklet can testify to the Lord's power. Even if you're already drifting from your faith, filled with doubts, or bogged down by sin, take heart—if the Lord can save me, surely he can save anyone.

The fact is, each one of us can misread the situation, venture in too deep, and drown in the intersection. Even if you hold on tightly to your faith, you're not immune to pain and anger, shame and regret. Ultimately, we all must cling to the mercy of God—to our compassionate Father who never runs out of patience, who didn't spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, whose mercies are new every morning.

But the Lord uses means, and I pray this short list of foundational principles will be a means to give you strength and courage for the years ahead as your faith becomes more and more your own. I firmly believe it's possible to keep your faith after high school. It's what I pray for my children, and it's what I'm praying for you.

PART ONE

Get *the* Gospel
Right

The Gospel Is Good News

“The gospel isn’t *try harder*, it’s actually *try less*.” These were the words the Lord used to awaken me from my stupor.

I was sitting in the back of a church service, half-listening to the sermon, likely hoping to find a reason to never come back. I hadn’t been part of a church for years, but my boyfriend was Catholic, and though I was mostly angry and confused about the church, I knew I didn’t want to be Catholic. So, for some reason, we thought it made sense to try a church neither of us had heard of.

The pastor’s words moved me to the edge of my seat. *How dare he*, I thought. *All I’ve ever heard is “try harder.” All I’ve ever done is “try harder.” But it’s impossible. God’s standard is unreasonable and I’m sick of feeling like a failure.*

This was why I’d left the church those years before, and it was the grudge I still harbored against God. But I couldn’t stop listening. Deep down, I was so tired: Tired of being angry and feeling like a failure, but unwilling to ever “try harder” again. His words felt like good news—the invitation I longed for but feared. I wanted to prove them false, but also, I desperately wanted them to be true.

That night, I sat alone at my kitchen table, rolling the pastor’s words around and around in my head. I pulled my dusty Bible off the shelf,

determined to prove to him—and myself—that he had it wrong. I was certain the gospel he preached wasn't the one reflected in this book and beaten into my head all those years in church.

I went to the book of Romans and began reading. The apostle Paul's words stopped me in my tracks:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.
(Rom. 1:21–25)

I saw myself in those pages—exchanging the truth about God for lies, descending into futile thinking, a foolish heart, and practicing all manner of unrighteousness (Rom. 1:29).

As I dug deeper into Romans that night and in the weeks that followed, I learned that, despite all those years I spent in church, I had the gospel completely wrong.

THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS

If you want to keep your faith after high school, you have to get the gospel right.

Gospel means “good news,” which (obviously) means it should be *good* and it should be *news*. In other words, the gospel is something entirely outside of us. It’s history, facts, a statement of reality—news. And it’s *good* news. It’s meant to impact us in a positive way. Think of a messenger who comes to tell the soldiers still on the frontlines that the war is over. He brings good news: Events have taken place (i.e. a peace treaty was signed) that impact their lives for the better. They can stop fighting and go home.

The gospel is, first, news: Jesus Christ—the very Son of God—came to earth as a man, lived a sinless life in obedience to God’s law, died a gruesome death on a cross, and was raised from the dead. These are true historical events, not some myth created to teach us how to live.¹ And if that’s true, then these are much more than mere historical events. They have implications for us that make this the best, most transformational news of all:

- » **Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, came to earth as a man.** His humiliation in the incarnation means that he experienced and can sympathize with human weakness—with *our* weakness. He became like us in every way, yet without sin. So he is our compassionate high priest, offering us mercy and grace to help in our times of need (see Heb. 4:14–16).
- » **Jesus lived a sinless life in obedience to God’s law and died a gruesome death on the cross.** This news becomes *good* when we recognize that he did all of this *for us*. “*For our sake* he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21, emphasis added). Christ paid the full penalty our sins deserved on the cross, and he gives

1 It’s pretty normal to question the truthfulness of these historical events during and after high school. For more about wrestling with these questions, see part 3.

us his perfect record of righteousness. In Christ, we stand before God justified—declared righteous—as those who can never be condemned (Rom. 8:1, 33–34). Perhaps you’ve heard it said like this: In Christ, it’s just as if I’d never sinned, and just as if I’ve always obeyed.

- » **Jesus was raised from the dead.** His resurrection assures us that our hope is not just for this life, but for the one to come. Christ’s resurrection “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15). He declared victory over sin and death, ensuring that even as we persist in a battle “against the schemes of the devil,” we do so with the might of the one who is seated “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph. 6:10–11; 1:20–21).

What the Gospel Is Not

When I graduated from high school, I probably would have skimmed that last chapter. I would have thought, *Yeah, I know all that. Let's move on to the deeper stuff!*

Somehow, the gospel stopped being *news* and it stopped being *good*. I knew and appreciated that Jesus died for my sins in theory, but it felt abstract and distant. Instead, I felt ashamed that I constantly needed Christ's forgiveness, like I should have graduated and moved on to bigger and better things. I thought there had to be more to the Christian life—something to *do*. I struggled with peer pressure, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty about my future. I didn't just want a blank slate—I wanted to feel good around my friends and in my life; I wanted my next steps to be clear; I wanted to stop feeling like such a failure.

So, the gospel morphed and twisted over the years. There were many contributing factors—I attended churches where the gospel wasn't faithfully preached, and in many cases, I'm sure I stopped listening or didn't take the time to truly understand. I certainly read some bad books and was misled by cultural narratives. And, as I came to see when I read Romans, my heart was just hardened. I needed the Holy Spirit's intervention.

Unfortunately, it's easy to be led astray by false gospels that make big promises but don't deliver. The apostle Paul wrote his letter to the

church in Galatia to confront them on this very issue, saying, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6–7). Paul goes on to expose this “gospel” they’ve believed for what it is—slavery (Gal. 5:1).

There are many false gospels rampant in the world today, several of which had lured and enticed me. While the adage is true that the best way to spot a counterfeit is to know the real thing, it’s also true that the surest way to succeed in battle is to know your enemy’s strategies. Here are a few “gospels” preached in the church and culture today:

1. THE “GOSPEL” OF MORALITY

The underlying message of the gospel of morality is: *follow the rules*. This is often what people assume Christianity is all about. They point to Jesus as an example to follow and teach the Bible as if it were just a manual for godly living. And, whether they intend to or not, some of our churches preach this gospel. We talk a lot about the rules, and we build communities around how good we are at keeping them.

Some of us *are* really good at keeping the rules. We like this gospel because it makes us feel like we can achieve something on our own. We convince ourselves that God, the scrutinizing Father, is quite pleased with us. *Look at how well we live up to his expectations!*

But this also means we have to keep up the facade. We’re constantly working, constantly striving. And we’re exhausted. We’re terrified that we can’t keep this pace. Then what will happen? What will happen when we realize we’re not as good as we thought?

Some of us, however, are not so good at keeping the rules. For some of us, the fence that's meant to keep us out of trouble is a little more like a climbing challenge. The gospel of morality feels restrictive and burdensome, setting us up for a losing battle. So, we embrace a new gospel:

2. THE "GOSPEL" OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The message of this gospel is: *follow your own rules*. When we believe this gospel, we convince ourselves we don't need the rules. We live according to our own terms, determined that we know what's best.

This is the gospel preached by Western culture. What is truth? What is morality? We get to decide. *You do you*. We find ourselves convinced that authority is oppressive and rules are an affront to our freedoms.

The problem, of course, is that this "freedom" is actually slavery. The things we chase after to give us pleasure actually lead to death (more on that in part 4). Our sin wreaks havoc on our souls and the law written on our hearts condemns us (Rom. 2:15).

3. THE "GOSPEL" OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

Follow your dreams, the gospel of self-fulfillment preaches. If you've seen any Disney movie, you've heard this one. *I exist to fulfill my potential*, we tell ourselves. *I have everything I need inside of me! God just wants me to be happy!*

So, we go about building the life of our dreams, certain it must be God's plan to see us happy and successful. But instead of helping us achieve

that elusive fulfillment, this gospel taunts us: *Why aren't you doing more with your life? Why is your life so ordinary? Are these really your dreams? Why aren't you more fulfilled? Does God really love you?*

4. THE "GOSPEL" OF SIGNIFICANCE

Sometimes we respond to the disappointment of the gospel of self-fulfillment by turning to the gospel of significance. Its underlying message is: *change the world. My life will be fulfilling if I'm doing something important*, we say to assuage our consciences. Then we turn to the injustices of society, determined to make the world a better place.

But this is another version of the gospel of morality, it just defines morality a little differently. It still centers on my work to improve the world, on my efforts to affect enough change and prove to God and others that I'm good enough.

TRY HARDER; DO BETTER

I meandered through these false gospels in the years stretching from high school past college, trying on each one, hoping to find the magic bullet that would make me feel okay in the world. With each one, I grew more embittered toward God, equally convinced that he took pleasure in setting the bar just out of reach and that he shook his head in disappointment every time I failed.

So much of what masquerades as good news today can actually be summarized in one big exhausting law: "Try harder; do better."

The fact is, anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't *gospel*, it's *law*.

Remember, the gospel is supposed to be good news. It comes from outside of us, doing for us what we can't do for ourselves. Without the grace and mercy offered to us in the gospel, the law can only crush us under its weight, continually pointing out our failures. This is meant to humble us and drive us to Christ, so that we might say, "Have mercy on me, a sinner!" It's meant to make us recognize that we can't achieve what we require, but that we have a loving Father who has provided for our every need in Christ. It's meant to assure us we don't need to keep trying harder to do better, but instead to find rest for our souls in the one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light (Matt. 11:28–30).

Make no mistake: If we've convinced ourselves that what God expects is *our* achievement, *our* success, *our* perfection, it's possible that life will feel good for a while. I certainly felt proud of my ability to follow the rules and, later, to blow them off. I felt satisfied by my achievements and empowered by my activism. As I moved from one false gospel to the next, I tried to convince myself I was good enough and, sometimes, it worked.

But I was so, so tired.

If your experience of faith is marked more by striving and exhaustion, resentment and anger, fear and failure, or even a sense of prideful accomplishment, perhaps you should consider if you've gotten the gospel wrong.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gospel Is For Sinners

There's always a Broadway musical soundtrack playing in my house, and *Hamilton* is one of our favorites. In the closing number, Eliza Hamilton reflects on her years after Alexander's untimely death. As she lists all her achievements, documenting her determination to carry on her husband's legacy, she pleads for more time. Living another 50 years isn't enough. Even with all she accomplishes, at the end of it all, she's left wondering: "When my time is up, have I done enough?"

This is the question of our souls as we strive and climb and work and achieve. It's the message of these false gospels as they declare to us, "You must save yourself." They taunt us with an ever-moving finish line: One day, your time will be up. Have you done enough?

The answer, my friends, is no. We can never do enough. That's the whole point.

If you want to keep your faith after high school, you've got to get the gospel right. And that means you don't have to *try harder*, you actually have to *try less*.

You try less because you realize that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15)—not people who have their act together, who are doing enough good in the world, or who are proving they deserve it. No, this is *good news*, remember? Jesus Christ—the very Son of

God—came to earth as a man, lived a sinless life in obedience to God's law, died a gruesome death on a cross, and was raised from the dead, *for you*. What you couldn't do for yourself, Christ did for you.

Getting the gospel right provides the anchor you need as you navigate faith and life after high school. It doesn't keep you from falling into sin, making mistakes, being hurt, or hurting others. It doesn't make you successful or prevent life from being hard or make you feel completely happy and fulfilled.

But, if Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that means he's not surprised you're a sinner! God isn't a disappointed father, but one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps. 103:8). When you blow it for the 4,000th time, you can believe that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

If Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that means you don't have to keep striving to prove you're good enough. You're not! But Jesus was good enough in your place, and God looks upon Christ and declares of everyone who puts their faith in him: It is enough!

If Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that means your significance is settled. You have been bought at a great price (1 Cor. 6:20). And we have a God who takes care of the birds! So, Jesus asks, of how much more value are you (Luke 12:22-24)? He goes on, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

If Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that means your life *can* be fulfilling—not on the world's terms, and maybe not by the world's standards. But when we stop looking to our own actions to prove we're

enough—when we stop looking to the false gospels of this world to give us life—we find that God has filled this earth with good things to enjoy. He gives us meaningful relationships and productive jobs. He gives us hobbies and adventures and even good food. And he is in the work of reconciling the world to himself, bringing about his new creation, and he invites us to take part in that. He has created good works for us to do, and then he gives us everything we need to walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

THE ONLY GOSPEL WORTH BELIEVING

I resonate with the apostle Paul as I look back on where I began to lose my faith. I imagine he wanted to shake the Galatians, just like I want to shake my 20-year-old self. How quickly I deserted the gospel of Jesus Christ for shiny promises that made me feel like I was something! This is where I went astray. I got the gospel wrong.

If you want to keep your faith after high school, you've got to start here: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This is the only gospel that's true. And it's the one that changed my life.

PART TWO

Belong *in a* True
Church

Go to Church

I moved several times as a teenager and young adult, and with each move came an entirely new church experience. As a kid, I went to a large evangelical church full of programs. I loved children's church, Sunday school, AWANA, and the big youth musical productions each year. When we moved, before I started junior high, we settled in a small fundamentalist Baptist church, complete with political values proclaimed from the pulpit and a weekly altar call. Then, we moved again, mid-high school, and went to a huge Southern Baptist church with a hip youth group. I joined the band and finally felt like I belonged. Towards the end of high school, my youth pastor left to plant a seeker-sensitive church and I joined his team, leading the kids' worship band and teaching Sunday school. In college, I didn't attend worship during the school year but somehow managed to spend my summers in Los Angeles working at an emergent church that focused on the arts, living our dreams, and making a difference. Later, I rejected the basic tenets of the Christian faith but still occasionally attended a church that was committed to doing good in the community. I taught English classes to immigrants and attended lectures by up-and-coming social justice activists.

If you followed my track through false gospels in chapter 2, you might see some parallels. It also might make you wonder: *If those churches were at the root of you being led astray, how can you say going to church is a key factor in keeping your faith after high school?* It's a valid question, and one I've come to feel quite strongly about, which is why I didn't title this section, "Go to church." Rather, if you want to keep your faith after high school, you must *belong* in a *true* church.

But before I get into *belonging* and what I mean by *true*, you *do* just need to go to church. Let's start there.

In an age where we celebrate individualism and continually hear stories of abuse, narcissism, and the tragic falls of compelling leaders, it makes sense that we might grow wary of institutions. I know a lot of people who would say they have a strong faith but don't attend church. Perhaps they've been hurt by their experience in the church, or maybe they feel they can get what they need by listening to a weekly podcast or hanging out with Christian friends. But the problem with this mindset is twofold: First, it's disobedient. Second, it misunderstands God's heart and the purpose of church.

YOU NEED TO GO TO CHURCH TO OBEY GOD'S WORD.

Why should you go to church? *Because the Bible tells you to.* This first reason might not be our favorite. It's akin to all those times your parents said, "Because I said so" (and all the times you subsequently rolled your eyes). Nonetheless, this is a legitimate and important reason that church should be a part of your life after high school. God commands it in his word, and as his people—purchased by the blood of Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, and entrusted with the Scriptures—we ought to gratefully and joyfully obey what he has commanded.

Consider the following biblical rationale for regular church attendance:

Regular worship has always been God's expectation for his people.

The fourth commandment says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God" (Exod. 20:8–10). There is a spiritual dimension to which this commandment points—to our eternal

rest in Jesus (see Heb. 4:9–11). But there is also a tangible practice that marks God’s people and stretches from the Old Testament into the New. The Heidelberg Catechism summarizes the fourth commandment’s implications for today like this: “that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God to hear God’s Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings for the poor” (Q&A 103).

From the time of the apostles, this time for worship and rest shifted from the last day of the week to the first—the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Because Christ fulfilled the terms of God’s covenant with Israel, his resurrection marks the dawn of the new creation. So, now we gather on the first day of the week to celebrate and rest in what Christ has accomplished for us.²

Meeting weekly for Christian fellowship under the apostles’ teaching was not optional for the early church. Before Jesus ascended, after his resurrection, he commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them (Matt. 28:19–20). So, what did they do? “[T]hey devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). This was the assembly gathered for worship. We see throughout Acts and the New Testament letters that the apostles fulfilled Christ’s commission not just by street evangelism or coffee dates but by instituting churches—baptizing disciples, installing elders and deacons, giving instructions for church order, and passing down Christ’s teaching for church officers to guard and share with others.³

2 For more about this, see the Core Question, “Why Did the Sabbath Change to Sunday?” https://corechristianity.com/free_downloads/why-did-the-sabbath-day-change-to-sunday/.

3 For more about this, see the Core Question, “Do I Have to Attend Church to Be a Christian?” https://corechristianity.com/free_downloads/do-i-have-to-attend-church-to-be-a-christian/.

Perhaps the most explicit command for this church attendance is found in Hebrews 10:23–25:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Attending church provides the environment for obeying many of Scripture's other commands. The biblical writers took for granted that believers would belong to a community of faith. Many of their exhortations are centered on how we are to behave within that community. For example,

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom. 12:9–13)

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. . . . And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:1–3, 9–10)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

YOU NEED TO GO TO CHURCH FOR YOUR GOOD.

Despite Scripture's clarity about our need for church attendance, reading a list of commands is often not effective in dragging us out of bed on Sunday mornings—especially in that first stretch when you're out on your own, with no one banging down your door telling you to get moving. And though "because God says so" *ought* to be compelling, when it's divorced from this second reason for church attendance, it becomes an isolated command that feels weighty and impossible, separated from the beautiful and inviting rationale that anchors it.

Why should you go to church? *Because your good Father is calling you, and there he promises to nourish and bless you.* He's not standing back with his arms folded, wondering if you're going to do what he says. No, every Sunday, he spreads a feast and invites you to come: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa. 55:1). He has prepared the way for you in his Son, who has secured the rest you long for week-in and week-out: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

Embedded in this invitation is a question: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not

satisfy?” (Isa. 55:2a). This weekly call rings out above the siren songs of our culture. It beckons us to cast aside our worthless pursuits and wearisome striving and, instead, to “Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isa. 55:2b).

What is this feast? It’s God’s word read, sung, preached, prayed, seen, and tasted. As we pull up our seats to the table, God uses his word to accomplish what he’s appointed—our nourishment, healing, sustaining, pardoning, sanctification, and equipping:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11)

I don’t know what your eating habits look like post-high school, but mine left something to be desired. The dining hall meant access to daily nachos. Dorm-room eating meant ramen, easy mac, and Domino’s delivery. While these were delicious choices at first, eventually, I felt gross. No one—not even with an 18-year-old metabolism—can consume this level of junk over an extended period of time and feel nourished, energetic, and fit. The “Freshman 15” is a thing.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. If you want to keep your faith after high school, you’ve got to go to church. God uses his church to nourish and sustain your faith, like those weekend trips home for real-food meals that actually include vegetables. Church is for your good! Without it, you’ll become spiritually malnourished, and you’ll start looking for food in the wrong places.

Go to a True Church

My story testifies to the reality that it's not enough to just go to church. You need to go to a *true* church.

Let me start by telling you what I *don't* mean with one of my mom's favorite jokes: You die and go to heaven, and St. Peter is giving you a tour. Suddenly, he starts whispering. You lean in and ask him, "Why are we whispering?" He responds, "This is the Baptist wing. They think they're the only ones here."

This joke can be told in any variation—Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, you name it. We are all tempted to believe we've got the corner on the truth market and we're the *real* Christians. We want to proclaim ourselves the "true churches" while we point our fingers at people we're sure are getting it wrong. This fracturing of Christ's church is grievous and exhausting. It's right that we lament the ways we've lost sight of the unity we have in the gospel. By calling you to be part of a "true" church, I'm not suggesting you become the theological police, declaring yourself judge and jury over a church's faith and practice. There are a lot of secondary issues over which the church through the ages has disagreed while maintaining fellowship over primary doctrines, such as those outlined in the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed.

Instead, when I refer to a "true church," I have in mind how the Belgic Confession distinguishes between a true and false church. Article 29

of the Confession defines the marks of a true church like this:

The marks, by which the true Church is known, are these: if **the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached** therein; if she maintains **the pure administration of the sacraments** as instituted by Christ; if **church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin**: in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.⁴ (Emphasis added)

In other words:

1. A TRUE CHURCH PREACHES THE RIGHT GOSPEL.

If the first pillar in maintaining your faith after high school is to get the gospel right, then it follows that you must attend a church that preaches the right gospel.

Now, let's be clear. There is only one true gospel. But as we've seen, there are many false messages masquerading as good news, and sadly, we often hear them sitting in the pew. Where you attend church has a big say in the gospel you believe. There are a lot of institutions out there that call themselves churches but deny the basic tenets of our faith. They reject Christ as the incarnate Son of God, they deny the reality of the resurrection, they refuse the doctrine of sin, they rewrite the meaning of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and they disregard Scripture as God's inerrant, inspired word. In so doing, they redefine

⁴ The Belgic Confession is a historic summary of the Christian faith written in 1561 by Guido de Brès, a Dutch minister. You can read the whole thing here: <https://threeforms.org/the-belgic-confession/>.

the gospel and, as we saw in part one, it comes out as law.

Here are a few questions to help you evaluate if your church is preaching the right gospel:⁵

- » Is the pastor explaining what the Bible means or expressing his personal opinions?
- » Is the sermon pointing me to Jesus Christ and his work for me, or is it mainly a self-help speech?
- » Does this church believe that all Scripture is divinely inspired, or do they treat the Bible like a book of fables?
- » Does this church shy away from some doctrines in the Bible, like sin, the cross, or the exclusivity of Christ for salvation? Does it seem like it's ashamed of what the Bible teaches?

2. A TRUE CHURCH ADMINISTERS THE SACRAMENTS FOR OUR SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT.

Christ instituted two sacraments for his church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Belgic Confession warns against anyone who does not "administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in his Word, but adds to and takes from them, as she thinks proper." It probably has in mind the Roman Catholic church, who added to this list of sacraments and heaped burdens upon God's people that he didn't intend for them to bear. But it also has in mind any church that does not properly administer these sacraments in Christ's church.

5 These questions are taken from a list by Pastor Adriel Sanchez and can be found in the Core Question, "How Do I Choose a Church?" https://corechristianity.com/free_downloads/how-do-i-choose-a-church/.

Sacraments are given to us as holy ordinances that represent, seal, and apply Christ's work to his people. They are not empty rituals; they are a means of experiencing the grace of God in our lives. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are what I had in mind when I said, in worship, that we see and taste God's word. These visible signs demonstrate God's kindness to stoop to us in our weakness. We want something tangible to help strengthen our faith and, like a compassionate Father, he remembers that we are dust (Ps. 103:13–14). He allows us to watch a baptism and remember our own—to recall how God set his name upon us, washing us from our sin by the blood of Christ, welcoming us into his family as those born into new life in his Son. He gives us bread and wine so that we can taste and remember that Christ's sacrifice is not just for the people *out there*; no—it's *for me*.

For a church to provide the spiritual nourishment you need, it must be a church that administers the sacraments faithfully.

3. A TRUE CHURCH PRACTICES CHURCH DISCIPLINE AS ONE ELEMENT OF HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP.

Church discipline can sound a little scary. Maybe you remember your parents “disciplining” you—it wasn’t much fun! So, why is a church that practices discipline important to help you keep your faith?

Church discipline isn’t primarily about punishment. Instead, it’s about discipleship (“disciple” is the root word for both discipline and discipleship). If you’ve ever wanted to succeed at something, you’ve had to be disciplined in your approach: practicing a sport, studying for the SAT, writing poetry, painting, weightlifting—all of these endeavors and more require discipline.

Churches that practice discipline begin with teaching the Bible and then they surround you with faithful men and women to help you live in light of what the Bible teaches. They can gently correct you, they can help you up when you've fallen into sin, and they can walk with you on paths of godliness. Notice that this kind of discipline requires community: people who know you and are willing to pursue the Christian life with you, even if that means speaking hard truths and confronting you when you are unrepentant.

Sometimes, we can fool ourselves into thinking that the sin we're struggling with is actually better than Jesus. That's when "church discipline is a painful remedy meant to shock [us] into realizing the gravity of [our] sin."⁶ In 1 Corinthians 5:5, the apostle Paul told the church to put out a man who was sleeping with his stepmother. They couldn't treat him like he was a normal brother in Christ while he was unrepentantly engaged in sin. Paul hoped that by taking such a drastic step, the man would wake up and realize how deeply deceived he was by his sin.

Churches that practice church discipline recognize that we're all sinners and we all need help pursuing Christ. When practiced well, church discipline isn't a weapon—it's a comfort. It demonstrates that a church takes sin seriously, but also that it takes God's patience and mercy seriously. When we are honest with one another about our sin struggles, when we hear our pastors pronounce the forgiveness of sins, when we receive the Lord's Supper, when we hear God's good word in the benediction at the end of the worship service, we are being disciplined and disciplined into conformity to Christ. In all these ways (and more), Jesus is washing us with the water of the word, purifying us from every blemish so that we might be presented to him in the splendor of holiness (Eph 5:26-27).

6 William Boekestein, "Am I a Hypocrite? {Acts 8:9-25}" <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/am-i-a-hypocrite-acts-89-25/>.

Belong and Believe

When I first returned to church after leaving my faith in college, my attendance was spotty. Most weeks, I was weary by Sunday. The remnants of my life apart from Christ still held me with a firm grasp, and at the end of a week of waging war, I was exhausted. I doubted the authenticity of my faith; I felt ashamed of the many ways I'd failed in the week prior. Some weeks, the shame hovered so thick I never made it to the car, much less to worship. I stayed home, lonely and desperate, battling my doubts and insecurities in the dark.

But then the most incredible thing happened: people noticed when I wasn't there. As I became enveloped into a beautiful, gospel-formed community, I was welcomed into their families. They listened and patiently walked through my struggles with me. And they made sure I got to church.

Over the months that followed, this church family was God's sustaining grace for my fledgling faith. Where my life apart from Christ left me feeling lonely and ashamed, life inside the church began to feel like home, and its people became my family. They cared for me in my persistent struggles, holding me accountable to my new life in Christ while reminding me of his endless love and mercy, even when I failed.

For many, those first years out from under our parents' watchful eyes can feel like we're spending every day fighting to be faithful while we're in a losing battle. But just like God provided Aaron and Hur to hold Moses's arms steady when he couldn't hold them up on his own, so he provides

members of the local church to prop up fragile faith (see Exod. 17:12).

Recalling her early days of faith, author Rosaria Butterfield says, for many, the Lord's Day is wrought with temptation. But the communal life of the church can be the means God uses to provide a way of escape (1 Cor 10:13). She writes, "While community does not inoculate us against sin, godly community is a sweet balm of safety. It gives us a place and a season where we are safe with ourselves and safe with others."⁷

If you want to keep your faith after high school, my challenge to you is this: *belong* in a true church. Go in person. Become a member. Meet with the pastor. Join a community group or Bible study. Invite yourself over for lunch after church (and maybe even see if you can bring your laundry!). Serve using the gifts God has given you. Be honest about your struggles and ask for prayer. Yes, it's enough to show up on Sunday and be nourished through God's word and sacrament. But belonging to a church reminds us that persevering in our faith is a community effort. You don't have to do this alone.

SOME PRACTICAL REALITIES

Sometimes, belonging in a true church is easier said than done. There are some great churches in the world. And some not-so-great ones. Some communities are skilled in welcoming outsiders, others inadvertently put up impenetrable barriers. As much as I want to say everything on this list is non-negotiable, the reality is, sometimes we have to prioritize. Sometimes we have to deal with less-than-ideal. Sometimes, we just show up in faith and obedience without an obvious path for how God is going

7 Rosaria Butterfield, "Your Lord's Day Might Be Someone Else's Way of Escape," <https://www.9marks.org/article/your-lords-day-might-be-someone-elses-way-of-escape/>. This section was adapted from Kendra Dahl, "God's Mercy to the Lonely and Isolated," <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/gods-mercy-to-the-lonely-and-isolated/>.

to work. To this, I'd like to offer two additional thoughts:

1. FACTOR IN FAITH COMMUNITIES AS YOU CHOOSE WHERE TO GO.

Writing to high schoolers considering where they'll go next, my friend Aimee Joseph advises,

When making your college decision, make sure you factor in the faith community as much as you factor in the prestige of a school. Don't just visit the halls of academia, visit the local churches. Investigate opportunities to grow spiritually as much as you investigate opportunities to study abroad or do challenging internships. Our highly individualized Western culture often forgets that most of the commandments in Scripture assumed the second person plural (you all; y'all; you guys). As Paul reminded his young mentee, Timothy, "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness . . . along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22).⁸

Sometimes where we land is outside of our control, but where we can, we ought to prioritize proximity to healthy churches as we evaluate our options.

2. LEAN ON THE GLOBAL CHURCH WHERE THE LOCAL CHURCH LETS YOU DOWN.

It's crucial you be involved in a local church, even if it's not ideal. But where that local body falls short, ask the Lord to provide. And then put

⁸ Aimee Joseph, "5 Reminders As You Make Your College Decisions," <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/5-reminders-as-you-make-your-college-decisions/>.

some supports in place. Reach out to your hometown pastor and ask him to pray for and check in with you. Join a college ministry to connect with other believers. Listen to the weekly sermon at a faithful church in another community. Stay connected to God's word. Read great books. In each of these things, the Lord can supplement what's lacking. Go to church with the apostle Paul's words ringing in your ears: "[M]y God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

PART THREE

Know *What*
You Believe
and *Why*

You Need More Than Blind Faith

Your post-high school years probably look a lot like trying to figure yourself out. Maybe you're learning for the first time who the independent version of you is. For some people, that's enough to want to shed a faith that has felt pressed upon them. Maybe you're not sure those beliefs were ever yours in the first place. Or maybe you're new to your faith and feel confused as you try to understand your Bible, and even more confused as you come across different versions of Christianity. Maybe you're being introduced to a world of new ideas, and you don't know how to reconcile what you're learning in science, philosophy, or religion with what you've grown up believing. Maybe your friendships are expanding, and as you encounter people who view the world through a different lens, you start to feel some tension with the exclusivity of the Christian faith. Maybe you're seeing for the first time how cruel or dogmatic some Christians can be. Each of these experiences can start to poke holes in a weak faith, and if you're not prepared, you may find yourself sitting in a sinking boat. It may feel like the only option is to jump ship.

I was not among the rising number of evangelicals who lack basic biblical literacy, but I left the church nonetheless.

Here's my working theory: I had a basic understanding of what the Bible said, and I knew what the church taught, but I didn't actually know what I believed—and I definitely didn't know *why*. My beliefs were unchallenged. I could recall all the Bible stories and regurgitate someone else's apologetic

argument, but when I had doubts, I just recited platitudes I didn't really understand. When I got to college and started asking questions, that limited Bible knowledge suddenly couldn't sustain my faith.

The fact is, whether you can win at Bible trivia or think Moses was one of the twelve apostles, having a substantive faith is crucial for staying Christian after high school. And that substance comes from knowing both *what* you believe and *why*.

THE WISE MAN BUILT HIS HOUSE UPON THE ROCK

I recently told a friend I was trying to come up with a list: "100 Things Every Christian Should Know." My oldest daughter is currently a freshman in high school, and as I think about how to prepare her for the all-too-near future when she ventures out on her own, I want to help equip her with this foundational knowledge of our faith.

My friend looked confused and asked, "Isn't there just one thing?"

She has a good point. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the central tenet of our faith, and simple faith in Jesus is all that's needed— "[If] you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). As we saw in part one, we never move on from this good news to "bigger and better things."

The problem is that we all venture into other doctrines, intentionally or not. We can say, "I don't need theology; I just love Jesus." but as soon as someone asks us, "Who is Jesus and what did he do?", we've started doing theology.

We are meaning-makers, constantly forming a belief system out of our interpretations of the world. If our views about God, his character, and his actions haven't been shaped by the Scriptures, they will be shaped by something else. We'll become gullible, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (Eph. 4:14). Instead, God calls us to maturity. He gives us pastors to help us grow up in our faith, equipping us with sound doctrine (Eph. 4:11–16; Titus 2:1); he gives us his word to teach, reprove, and correct us, and to train us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16); and he gives us his church, where we are all to "let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly, teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16). As we grow in knowing what we believe, we become those who live on "solid food"—"those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). We can confidently venture out into the world, testing what we hear against what we know.

As you face new ideologies, experiences, and conversation partners after high school, your foundation will be exposed. Will you be "like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock"? Or will we be "like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation"? (Luke 6:48–49). If you're content to live with a house built upon the sand, Jesus's words serve as a stark warning: Your house will fall. "When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great" (Luke 6:48–49).

YOU NEED MORE THAN BLIND FAITH

The faith that will survive in adulthood is faith that is *yours*. I don't mean it all depends on you—quite the contrary, as we'll see.⁹ I mean that

9 For more on this see the conclusion to this booklet, "God Will Keep You."

lasting faith is rooted in *your* knowledge of God, not your parents' or your pastor's. It should go without saying, but your beliefs should be something you actually believe!

You've probably heard someone accuse Christians of "blind faith." But that's not what the Scriptures call us to. God reveals himself to us throughout history and recorded his self-revelation for us in his Scriptures. Our faith is rooted in evidence of God's steadfast love. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen" (NKJV, emphasis added). The chapter goes on in what is often called "the hall of faith," listing people in biblical history—the "cloud of witnesses" that has gone before us (Heb. 12:1). Notice how the writer describes their faith. It's not blind—it's rooted in who God is. These people knew God's character; they trusted his promises. And so, they persevered, even for what they could not see.

Consider also the language the apostle Paul uses as he describes his courage to persevere in the midst of suffering for Christ: "But I am not ashamed, for I *know* whom I have believed, and I am *convinced* that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me" (2 Tim. 1:12, emphasis added).

You too need to *know* and be *convinced*. You need to be like the Bereans in Acts who, "received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). You must know what you believe.

And this process of knowing *what* will also help you to know *why*. As you examine the evidence and consider its substance, what you believe will become more than just isolated truths. You'll be able to explain *why* they're yours.

GOD CAN HANDLE YOUR QUESTIONS

Sometimes, I think we're afraid to ask why. At least, that's how I felt growing up in the church. "Why" or "why not?" felt like sacrilegious questions that betrayed doubt and unbelief. If we've bought into the concept of blind faith, it's easy to see how this follows. *Just trust God*, well-meaning people tell us as we struggle. But what are we trusting him for? And why should we trust him in the first place?

One evening, shortly after returning to the church as an adult, I attended a community group and shared with uncomfortable honesty about my distrust of God. There were too many paradoxes in my mind. *How could a loving God let me experience so much suffering? How could he truly be sovereign if he is also good? How could he be just and yet merciful?*

As I shared through tears, a retired pastor leaned toward me. I prepared myself for the rebuke I felt certain was coming. Instead, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Kendra, God can handle your questions."

I can't fully describe the confidence he gave me in those words. My god was weak. He was afraid of my questions. He thought I might expose something he didn't want me to see. He thought I might find the thread that could finally unravel it all.

But this man's God? He was unwavering. Steadfast. Faithful. Strong. He not only welcomed my questions, he wasn't the slightest bit intimidated by them.

So, naturally, I became unrestrained in my questioning. I had nothing to lose. I'd already left the church once, and this time, I felt like it was up to God to convince me to stay. And, audacious though I was, he did.

As I read the Scriptures and asked questions of anyone willing to sit with me, Bible-in-hand, I began to see not just isolated stories, but testimonies of God's kindness and mercy, power and patience. His unfolding plan of redemption recorded on those pages—his creation of the world, mankind's fall into sin, God's redemption of all things in Christ, and the sure promise of a future hope—testified to a trustworthy God. As I witnessed his wisdom in the lives of the patriarchs, I grew confident in his promises to work in and through my circumstances to accomplish his purposes, for my good and his glory (Rom. 8:28).

As I observed the way he related to his people throughout history, I became more confident to approach his throne to find grace and help from my compassionate high priest (Heb. 4:16). I came to treasure the stories of Jacob, Rahab, Peter, and Paul, because they were like me—the foremost of sinners, clinging to the righteousness of Christ as our only hope for life and salvation (1 Tim. 1:15; Phil. 3:8–11). The psalms gave me language I didn't know I could use with God—language for my doubts and questions, my fears and, even sometimes, accusations. God's responses to his people humbled me and beckoned me. This faith that had only existed as a bunch of random facts I'd collected over the years became my family history—truths that tethered me even when I was tempted to drift.

The same can be true for you. God's word is alive (Heb. 4:12), and it offers you a sure and steadfast anchor for your soul (Heb. 6:19). God can handle your questions—all of them.

Answers to Big Questions

I needed to know God's character—to be convinced that he was really for me. But the questions that derail people's faith can range from rational to emotional to experiential. The Bible provides the comforting truth on which we can build our lives—but what about when it feels like it doesn't? And how do we know we can trust the Bible? What about that professor who told you it's full of contradictions, or the friend who read something about Christianity being written by the winners? And what about science, technological advances, and modern ethics—don't these things discredit the Scriptures, or at least mark their contents as outdated, prejudiced, mythical, or otherwise irrelevant?

When I say that God can handle your questions, I mean these too. Your struggle might look different than mine, but your questions leave God no less unrattled. He can handle them. He may not answer them exactly how we'd like. Sometimes, the Christian life looks like holding complicated truths in tension, unable to resolve them. But our faith is not blind. God gives us enough evidence to hold us upright amidst what must be left unknown. He invites us to *dig down deep* and build our house upon a rock. So, dig. Dig into what you believe and then ask why you believe it. Find the evidence. Search out the substance.

There are many great resources out there to help you with this, so this is the chapter where I tell you to go read other books. I can't sum up all of Christian doctrine in these short pages, but there are some wonderful and accessible resources out there that will help give you a

solid foundation in the basics. I've provided a list of recommendations at the end of this chapter.

As we saw in part two, going to church is integral to this process as well. We're meant to work out our doctrine in community with other believers and alongside the many faithful Christians who have gone before us. Attending a church that values the historic creeds, confessions, and catechisms will help provide a framework for understanding what you believe and provide a trustworthy space to ask questions.

There are a few big questions that often become the cause for doubt and confusion as you venture into the real world. Though I don't have space to offer you exhaustive explanations, here's a short list of core truths to understand:

1. THE BIBLE IS TRUSTWORTHY.

The Bible is truly a remarkable document. Its 66 books written over 2,000 years by dozens of authors are marked by an unparalleled unity. The story unfolds from Genesis to Revelation, documenting God's plan to rescue sinners through his promised seed (Gen. 3:15). Prophecies recorded in incredible detail are fulfilled hundreds of years later in Jesus Christ. Manuscripts of the Scriptures are meticulously copied, preserved, and passed down from one generation to the next with very few errors. And, all these years later, this book is alive! By the Spirit's power, it continues to change lives every day.

Nonetheless, questioning the Bible's truthfulness may be one of the first shots fired after high school. Perhaps someone will tell you that the Bible is full of contradictions. Some will point to passages that seem to conflict with scientific or historical knowledge. Maybe others will pull out

passages they say are racist or misogynistic or homophobic. Some will tell you the Bible is a book containing solid moral teaching, but that's all it is. And others will tell you it's just the jumping-off point—that the Bible is outdated; God continues to speak and his words are ever-evolving with the changing times.

It's easy to point to the Bible as our source for growing in knowledge and confidence in our faith, but what if your faith in the Bible is shaken?

Understanding the Christian doctrine of Scripture is an essential starting place as you make your faith your own. We believe that the Bible is inspired, inerrant, authoritative, clear, and sufficient. But even understanding what we *don't* mean by these words is crucial as we navigate the kinds of objections I outlined above.

» When we say the Bible is inspired by God, we mean that God is the ultimate author of Scripture in its entirety. We mean that the very words are inspired, not just the ideas. But we do *not* mean that God verbally dictated his word to the authors. He used human authors and allowed for diversity in style, interest, and context based on each human author.¹⁰

» When we say the Bible is inerrant, we mean that the original words of the Scriptures are completely free from error. This inerrancy does not apply to translations or copies, and some copies do contain variant readings due to copying errors over the years, though these are surprisingly minimal. The Bible has more manuscripts than other more widely accepted historical documents (like Homer's *Iliad*), and this number of copies allows

¹⁰ This is often referred to as *organic inspiration*. For more, see Michael Horton, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 71–75.

textual scholars to determine the original readings with near certainty.

- » When we say the Bible is authoritative, we mean that the canon of Scripture is the norm for faith and practice for the church. The Scriptures give the church its authority; the church doesn't have the authority to add or take away from the text. Authoritative does not mean that every command applies throughout history in exactly the same way. God interacts with his people throughout history on the basis of his covenant with them. The covenant he made with Israel at Mount Sinai included various civil and ceremonial laws that were rendered obsolete with the coming of Christ (more on this in part four). Understanding Scripture in its context is crucial for understanding what it means to submit to Scripture's authority in our lives.

- » When we say the Bible is clear, we mean that it's clear in its message of redemption in Christ. We do not mean that the Bible is clear on every question we want to ask it. The books of the Bible are literature, written in a particular genre with a particular authorial intent, and they must be studied in their original historical and literary context.

- » When we say the Bible is sufficient, we mean that the Bible contains all that is needed to come to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:15) and for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). The Scriptures are enough—there is no need for further special revelation. But this doesn't mean that God doesn't continue to speak. The canon is closed, but God speaks to us by his Spirit through his word read and preached.

2. JESUS IS GOD.¹¹

No one really disputes that Jesus lived on earth some 2,000 years ago. His crucifixion is also a largely undisputed historical fact. But in order for people to dismantle Christianity, they have to make Jesus something other than God in the flesh, the Savior of the world. You'll hear him lauded as a great moral teacher, a warrior for justice, and the ultimate example of self-sacrifice. But Jesus claimed to be God. Christianity truly rises or falls based on whether or not this is true.

If you're having doubts about Christianity's claims, dig into Jesus's self-identification. The Gospel accounts are tied to datable events. Jesus claimed to be God and then corroborated his claim with evidence—performing miracles, forgiving sin, and fulfilling numerous prophecies in incredible detail. These claims led to his death. The tomb was empty—an undisputed fact corroborated by other historical sources. Jesus rose from the dead as he said, appearing to numerous eyewitnesses and transforming lives. His disciples scattered into hiding at Jesus's crucifixion, but later they emerged as bold messengers of his resurrection, refusing to recant even as they faced their own gruesome deaths.

If these things are true—if Jesus is truly raised from the dead—then he is the eternal Son of God into whose hands the last judgment has been committed. Listen to him!

3. SIN IS REAL.

I doubt you had to wait until after high school to experience suffering in the world. From school shootings, natural disasters, pandemics, and

¹¹ Read more in Horton, *Core Christianity*, 23–37.

terrorism, to dysfunctional families, broken relationships, loss of loved ones, and the myriad options of sin and suffering that might have plagued you, you are likely already intimately acquainted with grief. But there is something about finding the freedom to ask *why* that brings all these experiences to the surface. *Why, God? Where were you? Why were you silent? Why didn't you intervene?*

One of the most common objections to Christianity—what people consider their “mic drop” moment—is what is often called “the problem of evil.” The philosopher Epicurus famously asked it like this: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence comes evil?”¹²

Despite the difficulty of this question, Christianity provides the only satisfying response. Our doctrine of sin explains the existence of evil in the world. Our longing for justice further testifies to God’s existence—his law is written on our hearts. And the cross of Christ provides a paradigm for how God will address evil. He works through the greatest evil ever committed to bring about the greatest good ever accomplished.

Sin is real and its effects are far-reaching. It’s right to lament, to cry out for justice, and to bring our sincere questions to God. Dig into the problem of evil. This is not the thread that will unravel it all, but knowing how you will answer Epicurus’s question will give you confidence as you face the trials that come.¹³

12 Terry Klumpp, “The Trilemma of Evil in a Classical Question,” <https://www.newscientist.com/letter/0-the-trilemma-of-evil-in-a-classical-question/>.

13 For more on the problem of evil, read William Boekestein, “The Problem of Evil {Lord’s Day 4},” <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/the-problem-of-evil-lords-day-4/>.

4. GOD IS SOVEREIGN, GOOD, AND WISE.

We're all guilty of crafting mental pictures of God at some point in our lives. Some of these pictures are formed out of our experiences. Maybe we imagine God is like our impossible-to-please fathers, or the gentle grandpa who snuck you chocolates when Mom wasn't looking, or maybe he's like the hellfire and brimstone preacher from your childhood. Other pictures come from our misunderstanding of the biblical narrative. What kind of God would tell Isaac to sacrifice his son? Did Achan's whole family really deserve to be punished for his sin? How could God allow Israel to undergo the humiliation of exile? Why did Jesus have to die on a cross?

Reading J.I. Packer's classic book *Knowing God* was transformational for me. As Packer works through each attribute of God, he notes not just how the Scriptures reveal this aspect of God's character and actions, he also draws out how the attributes work together. He describes how God can be both just and merciful. He marvels at God's transcendence and nearness. And he draws together the importance of these three characteristics of God: he is sovereign, good, and wise.¹⁴

If God is sovereign, that means everything is under his control. He has the power to orchestrate the events of human history to achieve his ends. This is good news because God is also wise. He is *wisely* exercising his sovereignty, not just accomplishing any old end, but the one he has wisely purposed.

And *this* is good news, because God is also *good*. In his wise, sovereign actions, he is not just arbitrarily accomplishing his purposes, aloof as to their impact on our lives. No, he is committed to bringing about our good—to accomplishing our salvation.

¹⁴ This section summarizes principles found in J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Having a holistic picture of who God is—limited as it will still be—provides solid footing as we navigate faith and life after high school.

5. COMMON GRACE IS ESSENTIAL.

One of the most discouraging things about being a Christian is . . . other Christians. It can be so disheartening to watch fellow believers be dismissive, condescending, or unkind to those both inside and outside the church. It's especially frustrating to find an interest or passion after high school and then discover that those in the church are leery of your discipline. Many a science, psychology, or philosophy major has left the church upon finding there was no longer a place for them.

Satan is cunning, and we must be discerning, testing everything we learn against God's revealed word. It requires humility to submit our passions before the Lord, asking him to root out what doesn't honor him. But a false notion permeates some Christian circles—the mistaken belief that only what is inherently *Christian* can be good, true, and beautiful.

This idea is itself unbiblical, causing Christians to “press the Bible into saying things that it does not really say and . . . [unintentionally marginalize] the book of nature,” writes theologian J.V. Fesko. He goes on to say, “Christians undoubtedly stand in antithesis to non-Christians, but not at every point of their existence. There is a place for common notions, not because we capitulate to sinful human autonomy, but because we rightly recognize that God has created all human beings in his image.” The path forward, then, is to “recognize the importance, utility, and necessity of common grace.”¹⁵

15 J. V. Fesko, *Reforming Apologetics: Retrieving the Classic Reformed Approach to Defending the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 99–100.

Common grace refers to God's favor toward everyone. It's because of God's common grace towards humanity that the sun rises each day, societies continue to function despite sin, and we can enjoy a wealth of good things—food, music, art, culture, technology, and work—alongside unbelievers. Having a good doctrine of common grace helps position us as we venture into a shared world—especially if we're emerging from what may have been a Christian cocoon.¹⁶ This doesn't negate our need for God's saving grace. And there are many ways in which Christians are called to be set apart from the world. But, as Fesko writes, that doesn't mean we're at odds with them at every point.¹⁷ This can be a refreshing place to start as we figure out what we can embrace and what we must discard.

REMEMBER TO ASK WHY

As you dig into your faith, seeking to understand what you believe and why, there's one more aspect to *why* that we don't want to miss. We don't just study these truths to feel confident or win at arguments. We want to know what we believe and why so that we can be transformed by these truths to live faithful lives of worship and obedience.

Theologian and professor Michael Horton breaks down the study of theology into four "D's": Drama, Doctrine, Doxology, and Discipleship.¹⁸ First, we look to the storyline of Scripture (drama), and from there we derive the truths we believe (doctrine). But that's not the end of the story. As we behold God's story of redemption in Christ and we marvel at the glorious truths that arise as a result, it draws our hearts to

16 For a good summary of the biblical doctrine of common grace, see Josh Maloney, "What Is Common Grace?" <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/what-is-common-grace/>.

17 Fesko, *Reforming*, 100.

18 Horton, *Core Christianity*, 17–21.

worship (doxology). “In view of God’s mercy,” then, we “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom. 12:1). Our worship leads us to grateful obedience (discipleship). Good theology is not just a mental exercise. It results in lives conformed to the image of Jesus.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS¹⁹

- » *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God’s Story*
by Michael Horton
- » *Summary of Christian Doctrine* by Louis Berkhof
- » *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*
by J. I. Packer
- » *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer
- » *The Unfolding Word: The Story of the Bible from Creation to New Creation* by Zach Keele
- » *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*
by Michael Brown and Zach Keele
- » *Ultimate Guide to Defend Your Faith* by Doug Powell
- » *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* by C. John Collins

¹⁹ Core Christianity exists to help people build a solid foundation in the basics. Check out our articles, radio episodes, booklets, Bible studies, and more at www.corechristianity.com.

PART FOUR

Cling *to the*
Goodness
of God

Get the Law Right

My high school youth group spent an inordinate amount of time discussing what good Christians should do. I couldn't articulate the gospel, but I knew that I should avoid drunken parties, never swear, and definitely not have sex. I encountered lots of other rules along the way too: Some Christian communities decried dancing, playing cards, wearing jeans, getting tattoos, and voting Democrat. Though I easily rejected some of these superficial rules (I mean, my *Grandma* plays cards!), many of them held me in a tight grip. When I went to college, keeping my Christian faith looked like a morality checklist. I prided myself on being the person at the party not drinking.

For some people, this checklist feels empowering. (Following the rules *is* one of the false gospels we saw in part one.) But for me, the checklist eventually felt cumbersome. Standing in the background bored me as I watched everyone drink, dance, and have the time of their lives. I started to feel like I was missing out. My resolve gradually disintegrated until I gave up and joined my peers in their revelry. And, if I'm going to be totally honest, at first it was fun. I felt free. I felt like I belonged.

But those feelings were fleeting. Shame quickly followed in their wake, threatening to overwhelm me. What started out as the pursuit of fun became the pursuit of escape. I couldn't stand to be around myself, so I tried to disappear into the dancing crowds with the loud music and the blurred memories in the morning.

I can think of a few reasons why I left my faith after high school:

- » I didn't know the gospel and assumed God was forever disappointed in me. I was tired of feeling like a failure.
- » I stopped going to church. I wasn't being regularly nourished by God's word and sacraments. I never heard the assurance of pardon. I didn't belong in a community of people who could hold me upright as I faltered.
- » I didn't really know what I believed. I didn't feel like I could ask questions, and my flimsy doctrine wasn't enough to sustain me.

But I also think I discarded my faith because I resented God. It seemed like he was utterly opposed to my happiness—like he crafted his rules to make life as boring and isolating as possible. I longed for the good life and didn't see how my faith could get me there.

Just like I had gotten the gospel wrong, I got the law wrong.

THE OBEDIENT LIFE IS THE GOOD LIFE

It's easy to believe the lie that freedom means a life without restraints. We often crave this kind of "freedom" as we look forward to leaving our parents' house. We're tired of being under their watchful eye. We're ready to make our own choices. So, we assume, a life without rules is the way to go.

Consider, though, some of the rules. Perhaps your parents made you wash the dishes after you eat. Maybe you resolve to never wash dishes again. But you're living on your own. You don't have a maid or a mom to pick up after you. How long can you live in the "freedom" of unwashed dishes before your quality of life begins to diminish? (I can tell you

from my freshman dorm experience that you can go quite a while. But, eventually, the smell will catch up with you.)

It might be hard to swallow, but many of your parents' rules likely had your good in mind. The restraints were meant to give you more freedom. They helped you live within the bounds of how life was meant to function.

Similarly, when we disregard God's law and live by our own rules, indulging our sinful passions, we're actually slaves: "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness" (Rom. 6:20). When we live by our own rules, we are "free" in some sense, the apostle Paul says. But does that really turn out the way we hope? He goes on to ask a question that stings as I recall those years I embraced a sense of lawlessness: "[What] fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death" (Rom. 6:21).

As you venture into life after high school, it's important to keep God's law in perspective. It's not about keeping you in line, it's about how life works best. It's not about God restraining your freedom, it's about his goodness.

Sin wreaks havoc on our lives. Maybe it's fun for a little while, but eventually, it will wear us out. It's not what we were made for. Michael Horton describes it like this:

Go against the grain of a piece of wood and you will get splinters. Defy gravity and you will not break a physical law; you will break yourself against it. We did not make ourselves, so it is insane to live as though we could be whatever and whomever we choose. We do not belong to ourselves, but to God.¹

1 Michael Horton, *Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears That Divide Us* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 28.

In Christ, God has set us free from slavery to sin and instead rules us with the law of liberty (James 1:25). “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom. 6:22). He gives us his indwelling Spirit to empower us to live according to his design (Rom. 8:9–11). The law that he’s written on our hearts becomes the very words of life, so that we can say with the psalmist, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

BUT WHICH LAWS DO I HAVE TO OBEY?

God loves us, and he gives us his law for our good. But knowing that doesn’t necessarily clear up the list of youth group rules. Did God really design the world to work in such a way that human flourishing comes from not playing cards? As your faith becomes more and more your own, you need to develop a framework for how to evaluate the various laws you encounter along the way. We’re not bound by extra laws added to the Scriptures (Matt. 23:1–4). Instead, we must calibrate our consciences to how the Bible defines sin and godly living, exercising wisdom alongside our Christian freedom. Here are a few principles to help you do that:

1. UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF GOD’S LAWS.

In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul talks about the different uses of God’s law in our lives. Of first note is the law’s ability to expose our need for a Savior. God uses his law to make us aware of the depths of our sinfulness so that we would forsake our attempts at earning salvation and cast ourselves upon his mercy (Rom. 7:7–11).²

² Theologians refer to this as the pedagogical use (or the first use) of the law.

Second, the law is written on every human heart. Each person is born with a sense of right and wrong for which they are accountable to God (Rom. 2:14–16). God uses this shared, natural understanding of law to restrain evil in the world, especially as it’s employed by justice systems in societies.³

Finally, when the Christian is set free from the law as a means for achieving salvation, the law serves to guide us in godly Christian living. It spells out the Christian life, lived “in view of God’s mercies,” which is marked by love for God and others (Rom. 12:1–3, 13:1–10).⁴

Understanding these different uses of the law helps us keep it in its proper place. We can’t earn our salvation through our obedience, but that doesn’t mean the law does not apply. As believers indwelt by the Spirit, we still experience each of these uses of God’s law in our lives. At my church, an important part of our liturgy is the reading of the law. This comes before we confess our sins—as my pastor reads God’s law to us, it acts like a mirror, revealing the many ways I failed to obey God that week (or moment). We live in a society that strives towards justice and, though it does so imperfectly, this reflects God’s law written on human hearts. And as I hear, read, and reflect on God’s word, I encounter his laws that are meant to order my life. God prepares good works for his people, and we are to walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

2. UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF LAWS.

When we talk about the law, we can have in mind both a narrow and broad definition. God’s “law” can refer specifically to the Mosaic Law—the set of commandments and statutes given to the Israelites at

3 Theologians refer to this as the civil use (or the second use) of the law.

4 Theologians refer to this as the normative use (or the third use) of the law.

Mt. Sinai. This includes the moral law (the Ten Commandments), the ceremonial law (including the sacrificial system and laws related to the temple and worship), and civil laws (laws that ordered the Israelites' lives under God's rule). We can also refer to God's "law" more broadly, meaning any of God's commands that stretch from the Old Testament to the New. In this sense, anywhere we see something to obey, we have encountered God's law.

The Mosaic Law served a particular purpose in history. The apostle Paul tells us that it acted like a tutor for God's people, showing them their need for a Savior (Gal. 3:24–26). The ceremonial laws that regulated sacrifice and worship pointed forward to Christ's work as our great high priest and once-for-all sacrifice for sins (Heb. 9:11–12). Now that Christ has come and completed the work to which this system pointed, the ceremonial laws are obsolete.

Similarly, the civil laws governed Israelite society under a theocracy, or a government in which God is the sole ruler. Though these laws were for his people's good in a particular time and place, they are no longer binding on his people today. Rather, we are to obey the laws of our governments, which arise from God's moral law written on human hearts. We can do so trusting that our rulers have been appointed by God (Rom. 13:1–7), and that even unjust rulers will be held accountable by him (1 Pet. 2:23).

When we understand how to read biblical laws in their particular category and context, it helps us to discern what binds believers today. If a preacher takes an obscure Old Testament law, twists it to fit a modern context, and then tells you it must be obeyed, you're right to be suspicious. The laws that persist from the Old Testament to the New are found in the Ten Commandments. Jesus summarized these moral laws as love for God and love for neighbor (Mark 12:29–31). "Against such things, there is no law" (Gal. 5:23). The various laws we find throughout

the New Testament help fill out our vision for what that looks like:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 13:9–21)

3. EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM WITH WISDOM.

In Jesus’s day, the Pharisees added to the law, thinking it made them extra holy to go above-and-beyond God’s rules. But Jesus rebuked them, calling them hypocrites and warning others against following in their steps (Matt. 23). Later, Christians who had converted from Judaism wanted to require new believers to uphold Jewish laws. This is what Paul is addressing in his letter to the Galatians. He offers a harsh warning to those who try to add works to their salvation: “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole

law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:3–4). Instead, he reminds them that they are called to freedom. But this is not a freedom to do whatever they want: “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

Likewise, we’re not meant to look to rules to make ourselves feel extra special and holy. We’re called to wisdom—seeking to understand how God has ordered the world, what he has commanded in his word, and how we can exercise our freedom in ways that are helpful (1 Cor. 6:12).

IT TAKES COURAGE

Why does all this matter for keeping your faith after high school? You need to get the law right because God’s law is really about God’s goodness. Joyful obedience comes from clinging to the goodness of God—from seeing all that he’s provided in Christ and trusting that his call on your life is for your good.

But it takes courage to cling to God’s goodness. Living with the grain of God’s design is how life works best, but it often means living against the grain of society.

As you venture into life post-high school, you will face all kinds of ethical dilemmas. And, as you do, another dilemma might start to creep in: the fear of man. Fear of man drives us to live before others—to measure our words and actions in terms of how they’ll be perceived. *Will they elevate our status? Will they help us belong? Will they gain us approval, appreciation, acceptance?* It’s the fear of man that drives us towards cowardice. Rather than defending what’s true, laying down our interests for the sake of the outcast, or going against the crowd for the sake

of Christ, we give in to peer pressure. We'd rather be liked. We want to belong.⁵

This thirst for belonging makes us start to question what we know to be true. You might wonder if it really matters to do your work with integrity, to obey the laws of the government, or to uphold a biblical sexual ethic. You'll encounter people who live contrary to God's design and you might struggle with being called unloving or intolerant as you strive to be faithful to Scripture's teachings. It's good to dig into these issues, to explore where you might have adopted extrabiblical laws that heap burdens upon people's shoulders. And it's certainly valuable to search your heart and see where you might be living out your convictions with pride, arrogance, or rudeness. But as you form and hold to biblical convictions, you will need to confront this fear of man.

The opposite of the fear of man isn't no fear at all—it's the fear of the Lord. We need to live before God's face. It's easy to fear the condemnation of our peers, but God is the only one with the power to condemn us (Rom. 8:33–34) and Jesus already bore our condemnation (Rom. 8:34; 1 Pet. 2:24).

Biblical courage flows from the confidence that we're God's beloved children. We live to please him, but not to prove ourselves to him or to others. If we believe that God is truly for us, that he declares us righteous because of Christ, that we're completely free from condemnation, then we can face every ethical dilemma—and any opposition or accusation—with courage.

5 Parts of this section are adapted from Kendra Dahl, "How to Give Your Children Courage," <https://core-christianity.com/resource-library/articles/how-to-give-your-children-courage/>.

God Is Doing Good to You

We've seen that God designed the world for human flourishing. He gives us laws that show us how life works best. As we trust in his goodness, we can joyfully obey his commands, believing that they are for our good.

But if you want to keep your faith after high school, you need a bigger picture of God's goodness. Because, sometimes, our obedience doesn't lead to flourishing. Sometimes, those who disregard God's law entirely seem to have it all together. Sometimes, their lives are good and our lives are hard.

GOD'S DEFINITION OF GOOD

I know I've just made this whole case about God's law leading to our good. But now we need to be more specific about what we mean by "good." We're tempted to define good on our own terms. We long for ease, for prosperity, for enjoyment. But we live in a fallen world. Sin has bent what should have been straight (Eccl. 1:15), so that, now, things don't always work as they should. Sometimes, choosing to uphold a biblical sexual ethic means you will be lonely. Sometimes, choosing not to cheat means you won't get the better grade. Sometimes, you can do everything "right" and still end up depressed, in a car accident, or without your dream job.

Lots of preachers out there will tell you that's because you're not doing

it right. They'll say you need more faith—that you just need to believe harder or obey harder and you will have the health, wealth, and happiness you long for. But this false gospel overlooks the story of God's people throughout the ages who endured tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword (Rom. 8:35). "A servant is not greater than his master," Jesus warned his disciples, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). But that's not the end of the story. Just as Jesus rose from the dead, so also "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

Our suffering is not evidence that God has abandoned us; nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38–39). Instead, Scripture invites us to a fuller, richer definition of what is good that far surpasses any earthly treasures or experiences: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed to us," the apostle Paul tells us (Rom. 8:18). We don't need to lose heart—"this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The health, wealth, and prosperity we long for awaits us in the new heavens and new earth (2 Cor. 4:18; Rev. 21:1).

And, while we await this eternal hope, God is doing good to us. We just need to have faith in God's definition of good:

1. "GOOD" IS OUR SANCTIFICATION.

Romans 8:28 is one of those verses that gets tossed around like a platitude. We're trying to comfort each other as we face difficult times, so we say, "Everything happens for a reason." The verse actually says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

It's true that everything happens for a reason, but that reason is not a mystery. Paul spells it out for us in the next verses: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that we might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29–30). His point? God is at work in everything to make us more like Jesus. He's shaping us into the glorified people we will be for eternity.

This is why James can say, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James. 1:2–4). No suffering is wasted; God will use it to bring his work in us to completion (Phil. 1:6).

2. "GOOD" IS GOD'S PURPOSES.

Romans 8:28 also helps us trust that God is at work in our circumstances to accomplish his purposes. All we need to do is look back through biblical history to consider the ways God orchestrated events to bring about his plan to save his people through his Son.

This is pictured on a smaller scale in the life of Joseph (see Gen. 37–50). Joseph is the favorite son of his father, Jacob, so (naturally) he is *not* the favorite of his brothers. They sell him into slavery, and he is taken from his family into Egypt. There, he gradually works his way up the ranks to be an important member of the royal household, until he is wrongly accused and thrown into jail. After sitting in jail for a few years, he is raised up to become Pharaoh's right-hand man, preparing Egypt for famine and positioning Pharaoh to be able to provide for the surrounding nations.

When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in search of provisions, Joseph is forced to face all that he's lost. And yet, instead of enacting vengeance against his brothers, he celebrates God's sovereignty, saying, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

Just like Joseph, we can trust that God will use our circumstances to accomplish his purposes. We may not serve the same purpose in God's overarching plan of salvation as Joseph did, and we might not get to see what those purposes are on this side of eternity. But as we look to what God accomplished "in the fullness of time" by sending his Son, we can trust that he will be faithful til the end (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:32).

3. "GOOD" IS GOD'S GLORY.

If we're being honest, we like to be the heroes of the story. We despise weakness; we want to feel strong, capable, confident, successful. But we are dependent creatures, and the humble life is the good life. God, in his kindness, facilitates our circumstances to help us remember to depend on him so that he will be glorified through us.

Consider how Paul talked about his weakness. He experienced a thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7) and pleaded with the Lord to take it away. But the Lord responded with a different kind of provision: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). So, Paul concludes, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

Similarly, Paul describes a season of persecution and suffering that left the apostles “utterly burdened beyond [their] strength that [they] despaired of life itself” (2 Cor. 1:8). But this too served the purpose of God’s glory—“This was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9).

Paul recognized that, if he remained weak, no one could give him credit for the work. Instead, God would receive all the glory. The same is true for us.

4. “GOOD” IS OUR JOY.

As the people of this world look to created things and the works of their hands to provide meaning in life, we can look beyond these gifts to a giver. We can see that even the best the world has to offer is only the smallest foretaste of the bliss to come. So we can enjoy these created things in their proper place—as good gifts from a Father who loves us. Meaningful jobs, satisfying relationships, good food, a beautiful sunset—these things and more can contribute to our experience of the good life. But when we’re looking beyond the gifts to the giver, we can find a joy that supersedes our circumstances.

“BUT FOR ME”

One psalmist doubts God’s goodness for a moment. Despite knowing what’s true, he takes in “the prosperity of the wicked,” and finds himself envious (Ps. 73:1–3). Their lives seem easy; their bodies are perfect; their ways, unencumbered (Ps. 73:4–15).

You will likely ride this same roller coaster after high school. You will look to those around you and wonder with the writer, *has it all been in vain?* (Ps. 73:13).

But he doesn't leave us there. He takes a step back and considers the big picture (Ps. 73:16–22). He realizes that those who seem prosperous on earth but have put their faith in themselves will come to a bitter end (Ps. 73:18–19). But, more than that, he recognizes that, apart from God's mercy, that would be his end, too (Ps. 73:21–22). Instead, even amidst his suffering, he recognizes that God is continually with him—and he is continually with us: “[Y]ou hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:23–24).

Despite the youth group rules, I have some words from Psalm 73 tattooed on my forearm. After I returned to the church, I followed the psalmists' path, questioning the difficulty of my new life in Christ. His closing declaration became the words I echoed by faith as I was tempted to doubt the goodness of God. Sometimes, I wonder if I should have tattooed them on my forehead:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. *But for me it is good to be near God*; I have made the LORD God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. (Ps. 73:25–28, emphasis added)

If you want to keep your faith after high school, let these words be your refrain: God is doing good to you, and that means, for you, it is good to be near God (Ps. 73:28).

CONCLUSION

God Will Keep You

Since I started this booklet with a confession, I might as well end with one, too: I don't actually think you can keep your faith after high school.

Or, rather, I don't think it's up to you.

Don't get me wrong. If you want to keep your faith after high school, you *do* need to get the gospel right, belong in a true church, know what you believe and why, and cling to the goodness of God. These things are essential. But, at the end of the day, it's God who uses these means to keep you. It doesn't depend on you but on him. And that's really the best news of all.

When I heard the gospel as a young adult, it felt like the first time. Only, it wasn't. I had heard it many times before. But for some reason, God had appointed that moment for the scales to fall from my eyes. For the first time, what I heard felt like water to my parched soul.

I can imagine the frustration of those who had tried to share the gospel with me before. "Why didn't you tell me?" I pleaded with them, and though they responded to me graciously, I'm sure they thought to themselves, "We did!"

As I reflected on my experience later, I realized that what had changed was not necessarily the message but my heart to receive it. I was struck anew by God's love for me. Coming to faith wasn't about me figuring out the right steps to take or getting everything just right. It was about

God's work, God's timing, God's patience, and God's mercy. Seeing God's faithfulness to pursue me, to place me where I could hear and respond to the gospel, to surround me with his people to help me grow up in my faith, to teach me from his Scriptures, and to grow my confidence in my convictions and his goodness—all of these served to strengthen my resolve to persevere, even as I struggled, doubted, and messed up over and over and over again.

If God can orchestrate all of human history to accomplish his grand plan of salvation in his Son, and if he can orchestrate *my* history to draw me to himself at the right time, then surely he can sustain my faith—and yours—until the very end.

This is the apostle Paul's confidence when he writes to the church in Rome: "For I am *sure* that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39, emphasis added). He echoes this confidence in his letter to the Philippian church: "And I am *sure* of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6, emphasis added).

How can he be so sure? Because his confidence lies not in those to whom he's writing but in the one who raises the dead.

My friends, God can keep your faith after high school. As you walk by faith, taking to heart the warnings in this book and diligently "[working] out your salvation with fear and trembling," I pray you will do so remembering, "it is God who works in you, both to will and work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13).

If you look to yourself, you'll end up in despair. But if you look to God, you'll find help and hope:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved;

he who keeps you will not slumber.

Behold, he who keeps Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD is your keeper;

the LORD is your shade on your right hand.

The sun shall not strike you by day,

nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;

he will keep your life.

The LORD will keep

your going out and your coming in

from this time forth and forevermore. (Ps. 121)

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:15–16)

The years after high school are filled with new challenges. Tough questions and different perspectives, responsibilities, and opportunities cause many to start to reevaluate the beliefs they've taken for granted. In this booklet, Kendra Dahl reflects on her experience leaving and then returning to the church as a young adult, offering encouragement and practical counsel for those walking through this unique season of life.

At Core Christianity, our mission is to help people understand the Bible and the core truths of the Christian faith. Every answer to a caller's question on our daily radio show, every article we share on corechristianity.com, and every resource we produce are designed to help people gain a clearer understanding of the gospel—the core message of Christianity.

Thanks for being an important part of Core Christianity!

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