

A person with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, stands in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright lens flare effect that partially obscures the person's face. In the background, there are residential houses, a utility pole with power lines, and some trees. The overall scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of late afternoon or early evening.

bbackstory



Does life

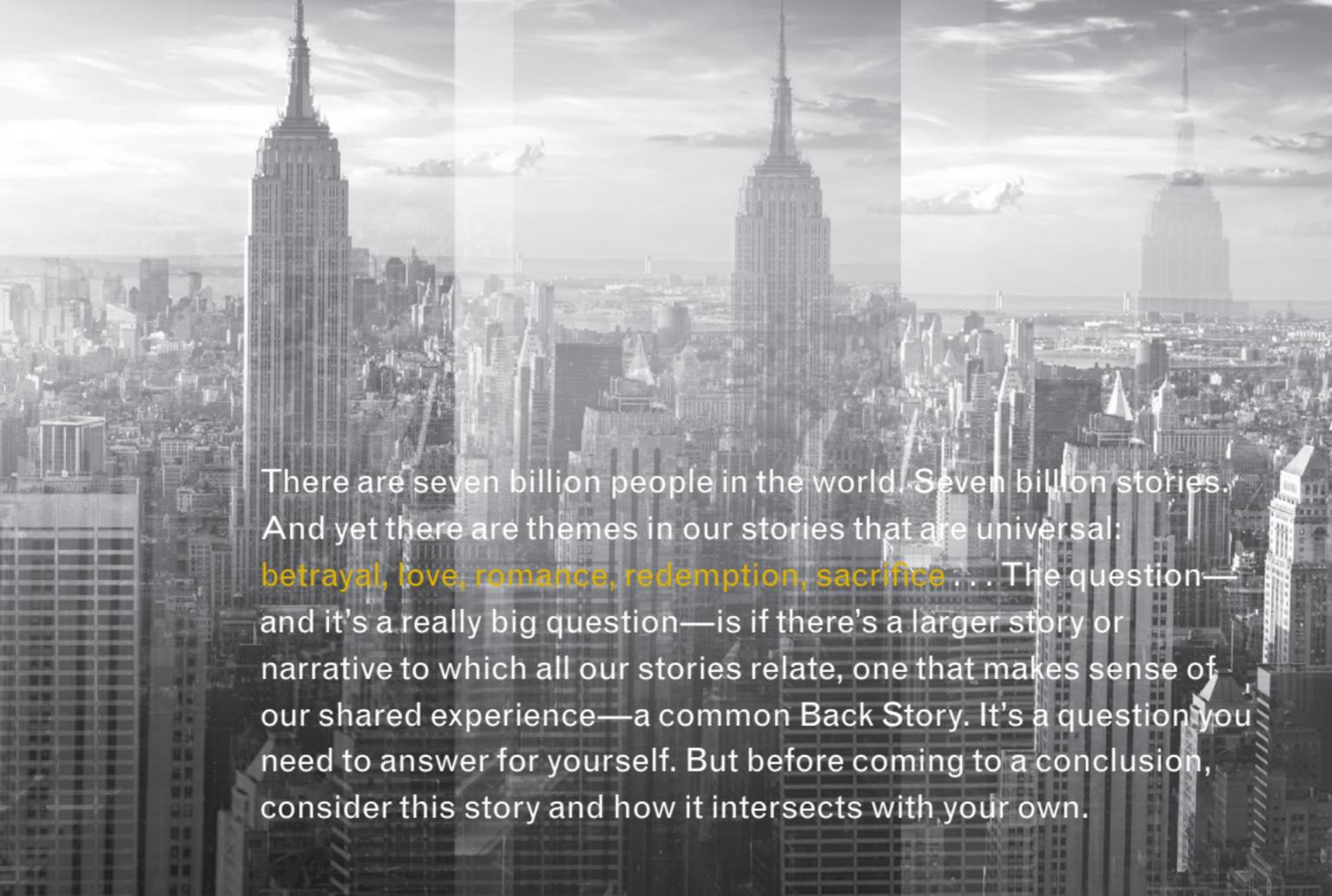
have a

backstory?

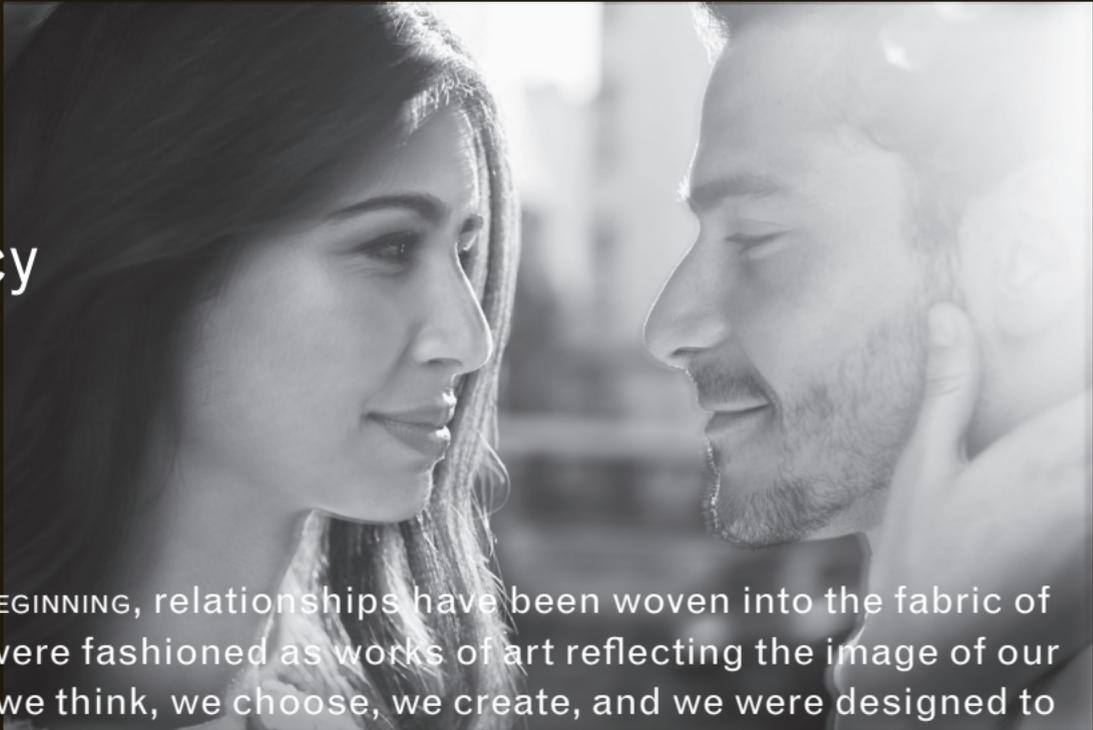


Life@Large Revisited

backstory
backstory



There are seven billion people in the world. Seven billion stories. And yet there are themes in our stories that are universal: **betrayal, love, romance, redemption, sacrifice** . . . The question—and it's a really big question—is if there's a larger story or narrative to which all our stories relate, one that makes sense of our shared experience—a common Back Story. It's a question you need to answer for yourself. But before coming to a conclusion, consider this story and how it intersects with your own.



Intimacy

Intimacy

01

FROM THE BEGINNING, relationships have been woven into the fabric of life. We were fashioned as works of art reflecting the image of our Creator: we think, we choose, we create, and we were designed to love—to experience intimacy with God and each other . . .

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them. —GENESIS 1:1, 27 (NLT)

Q/// On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your desire to know God?

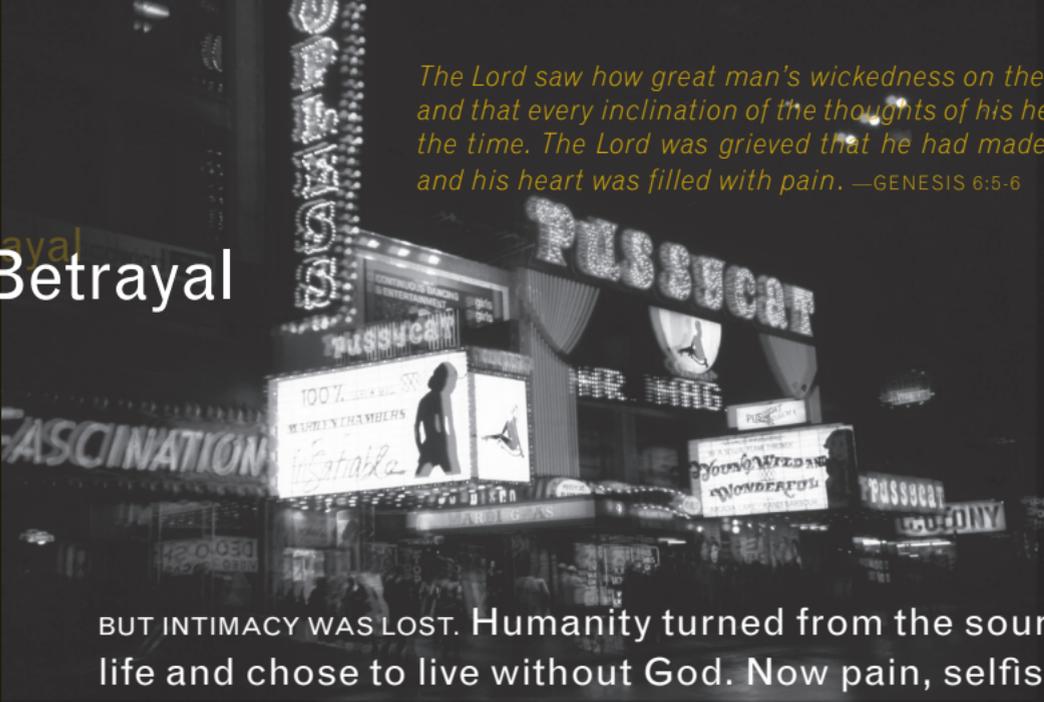
Q/// Do you see yourself moving closer to, or further away from God?

OUGHTNESS.

INSTILLED IN US is a longing for the ideal world and perfect intimacy for which we were created. We sense that the evils of war and rape and death are alien to our existence. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, we are confronted by an “eternal oughtness:” that the world is not as it ought to be, that unconditional love and perfect peace are forever elusive.

Q/// As you observe the world what screams to you: this is not how things ought to be?





The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. —GENESIS 6:5-6

Betrayal

Betrayal

02

BUT INTIMACY WAS LOST. Humanity turned from the source of life and chose to live without God. Now pain, selfishness, and a corrupted nature stain all our relationships. We experience the world as broken, life as lacking, and things not as they ought to be . . .

THE HUMAN CONDITION

1] FALLEN. *"All of us are unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags"* (ISAIAH 64:6). We were created for a relationship with God. But our hearts turned proud, and pride corrupted. We abandoned God and intimacy turned to alienation. Humanity is now fallen. None of us lives or loves as we ought. This is called sin.

2] BROKEN. *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless! What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted"* (COMPILATION ECCLESIASTES 1-2).

Sin severed our relationship with God and every relationship contingent to it: people with people (war, racism), men with women (sexism, divorce), people with nature (waste, pollution), and people with themselves (shame, fear). Sin has led us to this separation.

3] UNFAITHFUL. *"They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator"* (ROMANS 1:25). Rather than return to God, we construct our own paths to redemption and replace God with every conceivable substitute: money, success, popularity, entertainment, possessions, sex, power, drugs . . .

IF THIS ACCOUNT IS TRUE, it should seem intuitive. We should sense that God is there but distant from us; that the world is not as it ought to be; that evil pollutes our thoughts and actions; and that the pursuit of redemption is universal.

Q/// How have you personally sensed or experienced life's brokenness?

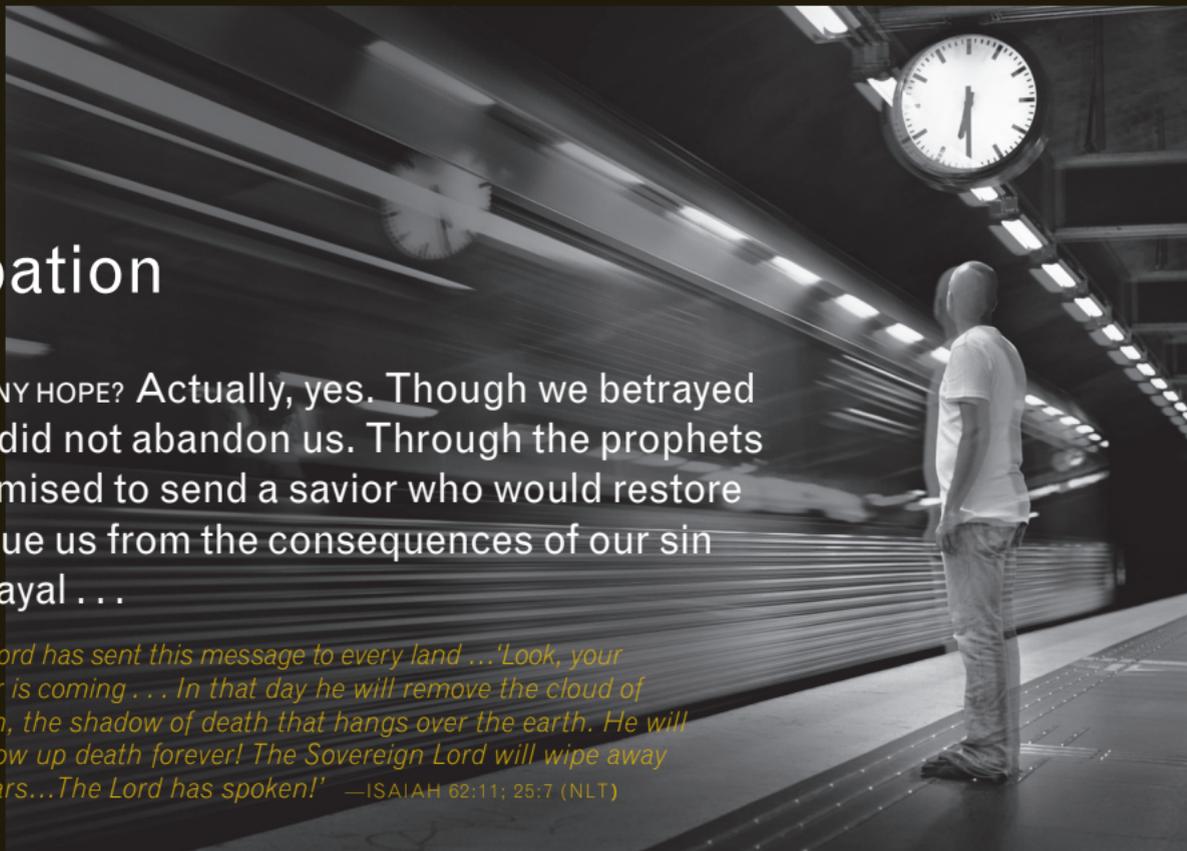
Anticipation

Anticipation

03

IS THERE ANY HOPE? Actually, yes. Though we betrayed God, he did not abandon us. Through the prophets God promised to send a savior who would restore and rescue us from the consequences of our sin and betrayal . . .

The Lord has sent this message to every land ... 'Look, your Savior is coming . . . In that day he will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears...The Lord has spoken!' —ISAIAH 62:11; 25:7 (NLT)



THE PROPHETS WERE GOD'S MESSENGERS THROUGH WHOM HE PROMISED THE WORLD A FUTURE DELIVERER (MESSIAH). THEIR MESSAGE, PRESERVED IN JEWISH SCRIPTURE, WAS VALIDATED AS THEIR MANY PREDICTIONS CAME TO PASS.

THE PROMISED DELIVERER.

BORN IN BETHLEHEM —WRITTEN BETWEEN 735-700 B.C.

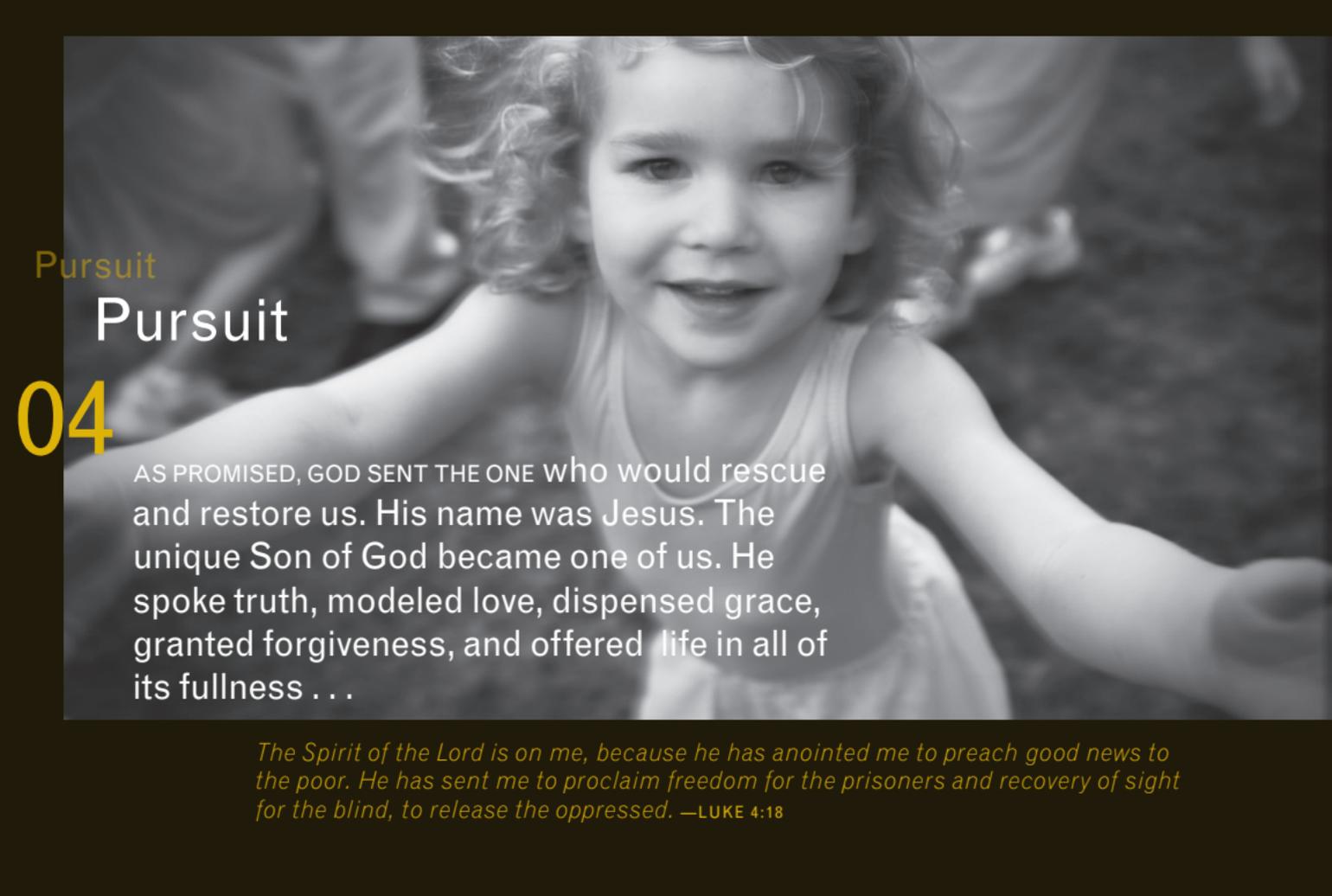
You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from eternity past. —MICAH 5:2

BORN OF A VIRGIN —WRITTEN BETWEEN 701- 681 B.C.

The Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. —ISAIAH 7:14

THROUGH THE PROPHETS, God described the coming Messiah. Above are 2 of over 90 specific messianic prophecies found in Scripture, all written centuries before Jesus. Among other signs, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem and birthed of a virgin; only one person has ever fit such a description.

Q!!! *Is there a time that you can remember experiencing God's presence or direction? Have you ever sensed God communicating to you?*



Pursuit

Pursuit

04

AS PROMISED, GOD SENT THE ONE who would rescue and restore us. His name was Jesus. The unique Son of God became one of us. He spoke truth, modeled love, dispensed grace, granted forgiveness, and offered life in all of its fullness . . .

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed. —LUKE 4:18

Q/// How is Jesus different from other religious figures?

UNIQUENESS.

THE CONCEPT OF “MESSIAH” DIFFERS from that of a prophet, mystic, or sage.

Messiah (MASHIACH IN HEBREW) is humanity’s Deliverer, the go-between or bridge between God and man. In claiming to be the Messiah, Jesus claimed:

He said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.”—MATTHEW 9:2

1] FORGIVENESS. There’s no shortage of moral codes one might strive to live by. Jesus claimed to forgive the million ways we fall short of any and all moral standards.

God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. —JOHN 3:17 (NLT)

2] RESTORATION. Jesus claimed to redeem and restore that which sin had destroyed.

Why does [Jesus] talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone? —MARK 2:7

3] SON OF GOD. From forgiving sin to granting eternal life, Jesus did what God alone can do. As C.S. Lewis observed, “a man who said the sorts of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman.”

Q/// If God were to wipe away every wrong thing you’ve ever done, said, or thought—past, present and future—how would you feel or respond?

Sacrifice

Sacrifice

05 LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY was revealed in love's greatest act. Jesus, the author of life, died for us, taking upon himself our guilt and atoning for our sin. How can we be sure? God raised Jesus from the dead. He is alive today and offers life to all who would receive it . . .

*Christ died for our sins once for all time: the just dying for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God. —1 PETER 3:18***

And yet, along comes this idea called grace. Love interrupts the consequences of your actions. . . the point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us. That's the point. —Bono

Q/// When you see the image of the cross what does it mean to you?

CROSSWORDS.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement. —ROMANS 3:23-25

SINNED: moral failing in thought and action. In what we do, and what we fail to do.

JUSTIFIED: a judiciary term where the guilty party is declared, not only innocent, but morally blameless.

GRACE: a free, unmerited gift, neither earned or deserved.

REDEMPTION: the price paid to purchase someone out of slavery.

SACRIFICE: religious usage: a substitute takes upon themselves the suffering and judgment of another.

JESUS' DEATH IS THE ULTIMATE demonstration of God's love. He took upon himself the pain, guilt, death, and condemnation of our sin and betrayal in order to restore a relationship that we have rejected.

Q/// Given these definitions, how does Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provide the solution to our sin and separation from God?



Invitation

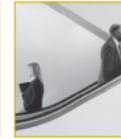
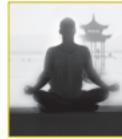
Invitation

06

NOW GOD INVITES US TO COME BACK to him through trusting in Jesus. Forgiveness is a free and undeserved gift, received only through genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Receiving Christ opens the door to life in all of its fullness . . .

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. —1 JOHN 5:11-12

Q/// Which image best represents what you imagine when you think of eternal life? Why?



LIFE EVERLASTING.

JESUS DESCRIBED eternal life in relational terms. He said “eternal life is this: that we might fully know the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent.” Eternal life is an ever-growing, never stagnating relationship with God, as well as ourselves, others, and nature. Here’s also what Jesus said about eternal life:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. — JOHN 5:24

For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. — JOHN 6:40

Q/// If eternal life is the restoration of perfect intimacy with God, then according to Jesus what is needed to have eternal life? Why?

Reunion Reunion

07



THE CLIMAX OF THE STORY is still to come, when Jesus returns to judge all with perfect fairness. The unbelieving and disobedient will not enter the life to come. But the forgiven will experience life in all its fullness, enjoying intimacy with God and each other forever.

Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them . . . He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever. —REVELATION 21:3,4 (NLT)

END? NO, THE JOURNEY DOESN'T END HERE. THE GREY RAIN-CURTAIN OF THIS WORLD ROLLS BACK, AND ALL TURNS TO SILVER GLASS. AND THEN YOU SEE IT. WHITE SHORES. AND BEYOND . . . A FAR GREEN COUNTRY UNDER A SWIFT SUNRISE. —GANDALF, THE RETURN OF THE KING

YOUR THOUGHTS?

THIS IS THE STORY: from rebellion to reunion, our journey back to intimacy with God. In response, here are a few questions to consider.

IS IT TRUE? Does this story resonate, making sense of life? (If you're uncertain, try reading the Bible for yourself. Start with the Gospel of John, an account of Jesus' life, words, and works. See what you think.)

DO YOU NEED JESUS? Jesus claimed to be the solution to our fundamental problem—separation from God caused by our sin. Do you believe that you need Jesus? Do you desire the forgiveness and new life that he provides? Do you want him to lead and guide your life?

If so, you can respond to Christ, right now, through prayer. . .

END OF STORY, OR BEGINNING?

A TURNING POINT?

ALL GOOD STORIES HAVE TURNING POINTS and this could be the turning point of your story. If you desire to turn to God and receive Christ as your Savior, you can express that right now in prayer. The following is simply a suggested prayer.

"Lord Jesus, I want to know you personally. I admit that I have sinned against God and am separated from him. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins in order to bring me back to God. I ask you to be my Savior and Lord. Thank you for giving me eternal life and making me a part of the family of God. Take control of my life and make me the person you created me to be."

DOES THIS PRAYER EXPRESS YOUR DESIRE?

LIKE THE "I DO" OF A MARRIAGE CEREMONY, it's not the words that are important but rather the decision to entrust yourself to another. This is a free gift from God that you receive, not work for or earn. Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? If so, you can pray right now. And you can know on the basis of God's promise that your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life.

A NEW STORY

TAKE JUST A MOMENT and read the following passages:

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life. —1 JOHN 5:11-13

By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works that no one should boast. —EPHESIANS 2:8,9

*[Christ speaking] Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. —REVELATION 3:20 **

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. —HEBREWS 13:5

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. —JOHN 1:12

According to the truth of these passages, if you prayed to receive Christ you can know that: your sins are forgiven, you have eternal life, you are a child of God, and that Jesus entered your life and will never leave you.

NEXT STEPS

YOU NOW HAVE A NEW RELATIONSHIP with God through Jesus Christ: a relationship that will never end, beginning now and lasting eternally. Like all relationships, your walk with God will need to grow and mature. Here are a few suggestions and resources to help you grow in your relationship with Christ.

- 1. Try spending a few minutes each day reading the Bible and praying.*
- 2. Start reading the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and then move on to the rest of the New Testament.*
- 3. Get connected with other Christians. Get involved with a local church or Bible study.*
- 4. Check out StartingWithGod.com, and you'll also find personal growth resources at CruPress.com.*
- 5. Last, look for opportunities to share with others your decision to trust Christ and follow him.*

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