

The HOPE of  
EASTER



*The Hope of Easter*

© 2016 by Outreach, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including storage and retrieval systems, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Published by Outreach, Inc. Colorado Springs, CO 80919

[www.Outreach.com](http://www.Outreach.com)

Unless otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations in this publication are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Other versions used include: The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9781942027355

Cover Design and Interior Design by Tim Downs

Written by Joshua Cooley

Edited by Darla Hightower

Printed in the United States of America





# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
Chapter 1: <b>The History</b>	15
Chapter 2: <b>The Need for Salvation</b>	23
Chapter 3: <b>The First Coming</b>	37
Chapter 4: <b>The Resurrection</b>	51
Chapter 5: <b>What the Resurrection Accomplished</b>	63
Chapter 6: <b>Reigning on High</b>	85
Chapter 7: <b>Worship and Awe</b>	93





# INTRODUCTION

**Hope** is a beautiful word.

To hope is to look forward to a specific outcome, to wish for a particular ending, to dream about a goal. Hope is a common pastime in our lives. We often hope for good health, a better-paying job, a bigger house, a car that doesn't leak oil, more kids (or less!), better political candidates, reconciliation in broken relationships, a shorter commute, a longer vacation, world peace, healing for a sick loved one, fewer bills, more athletic skills, and for relatives who don't act like they're from Mars.

There are other, more sobering types of hope. The frightened parents sitting bedside in the pediatric unit hope their little boy will be cured of cancer. The weary refugee from a war-torn country hopes to find a better life. The gaunt urchin in a developing nation hopes to find food for the day.

Hope is a powerful force. It encourages us, motivates us, gives us purpose, and even impacts the course of our lives. But hopes aren't always realized. They are

often dashed against the harsh realities of life, like a storm-tossed ship crashing into jagged rocks. Hope that is lost is one of life's greatest tragedies.

There is, however, another type of hope that never disappoints. In Scripture, the word **hope** means more than just mere desire. It's different from **want**, **wish**, or **need**. It transcends raw craving or a longing that might go unfulfilled.

Biblically defined, **hope** means “to expect with confidence.” Christian hope, in other words, is the eager anticipation of a guaranteed outcome. This is the hope of Easter.

The hope of Easter is found in the gospel message—the good news that a holy God has freely offered love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and eternal life to sinful humanity. The hope of Easter provides unique, lasting joy and peace. And it all has to do with a world-changing event that took place two thousand years ago in a small garden just outside the walls of ancient Jerusalem.

On that Sunday morning in the first century, several Jewish women awoke while it was still dark to visit

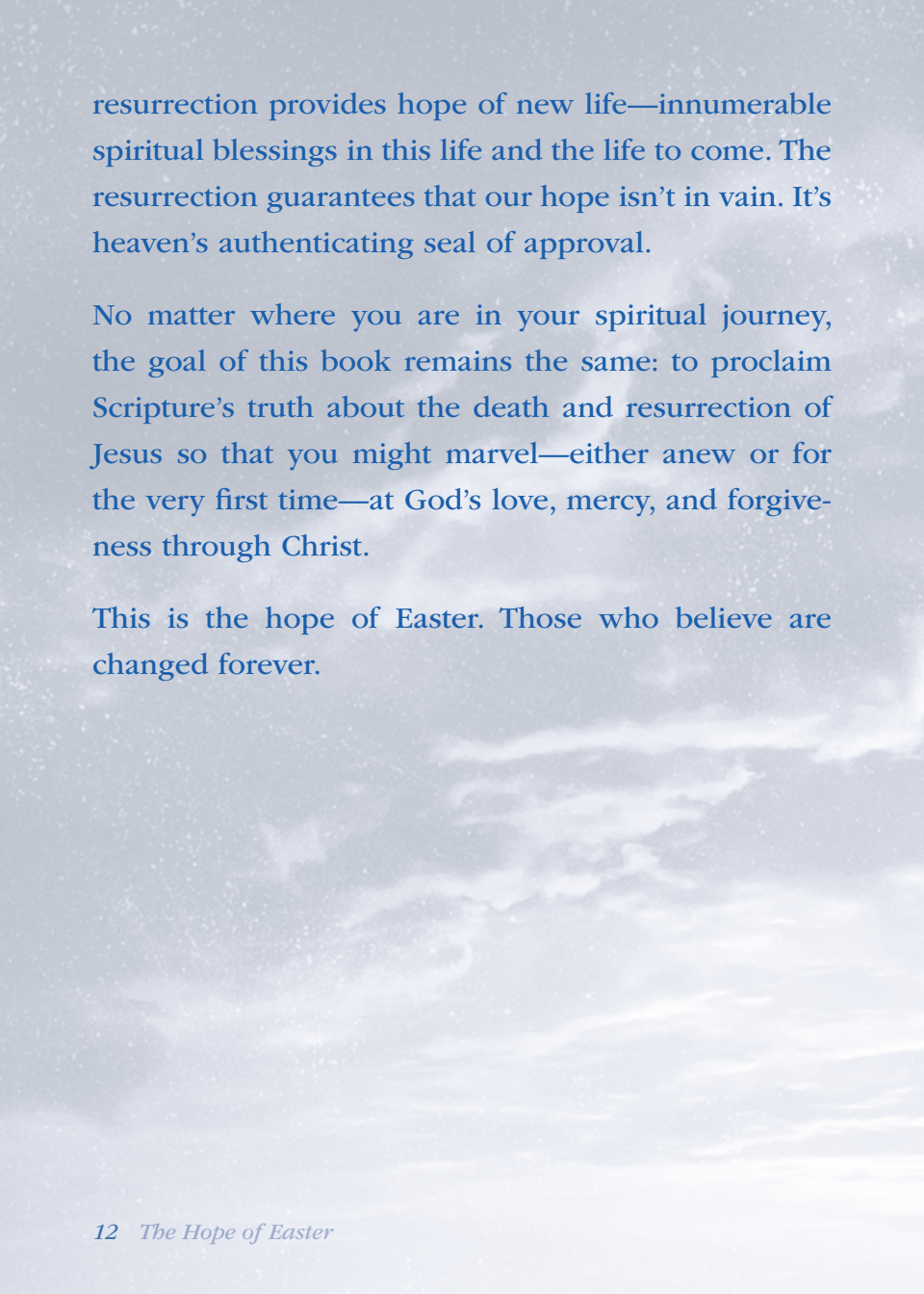


a sepulcher. Their mission? To anoint a three-day-old corpse with spices and ointments, part of a Jewish burial ritual that had been interrupted by the timing of the death, which occurred shortly before the advent of the Sabbath the preceding Friday afternoon.

The dead man was Jesus of Nazareth. His death had crushed many dreams. Throughout Palestine, people had hoped that He was the long-awaited Messiah, God's promised Redeemer. But at the height of Passover, the Jewish holy week, a bloodthirsty mob called for His execution and the Romans consented, crucifying the sinless Son of God between two criminals.

When the women arrived at the tomb that morning, though, they found it empty—the greatest news in history! Jesus wasn't dead anymore. He had come back to life!

Jesus' resurrection changed everything. It was the climax of God's great plan of salvation for mankind, providing hope to lost sinners. God's Son miraculously incarnated to earth to live a perfect life, suffer a sacrificial death, resurrect in glorious power, and provide eternal salvation to all who trust in Him. The



resurrection provides hope of new life—innumerable spiritual blessings in this life and the life to come. The resurrection guarantees that our hope isn't in vain. It's heaven's authenticating seal of approval.

No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, the goal of this book remains the same: to proclaim Scripture's truth about the death and resurrection of Jesus so that you might marvel—either anew or for the very first time—at God's love, mercy, and forgiveness through Christ.

This is the hope of Easter. Those who believe are changed forever.







## CHAPTER 1

# THE HISTORY

The legions are storming the gates.

Each Easter, armies of pastel-clad parishioners, dressed in their Sunday finest, flock to churches throughout the United States. Attendance figures swell to totals that most places of worship won't experience again for another 365 days. In 2015, half of all Americans said they planned to attend an Easter service, according to a CNN report.<sup>1</sup>

Easter's popularity, though, extends far beyond stained-glass windows. Each spring, the confection industry launches an all-out sugar assault on the public. Their weapons of choice? Chocolate bunnies, jelly beans, marshmallow chicks, caramel-filled eggs, and all manner of other teeth-rotting delights. Americans spend more than \$2 billion annually on Easter candy.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, Easter is a big deal. Like Christmas, it's a unique and somewhat bizarre intermingling of the sacred and secular. So how did we get **here**? To understand the





hope of Easter, we first need to ask: Why do we celebrate Easter?

Ironically, for all the hubbub surrounding Easter, its true origins remain a mystery. The term **Easter**, of course, is not found anywhere in the Bible. No one knows for sure when people started observing the holiday, although some evidence points to the second century.

This much we do know: the English word **Easter** traces its lineage back to the Greek word **Pascha**, which is derived from the Hebrew term **pesach**, meaning “Passover.” For more than three thousand years, the Passover has been one of the most important observances on the Jewish calendar, commanded by God Himself in Exodus 12 as an annual celebration of Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian slavery.

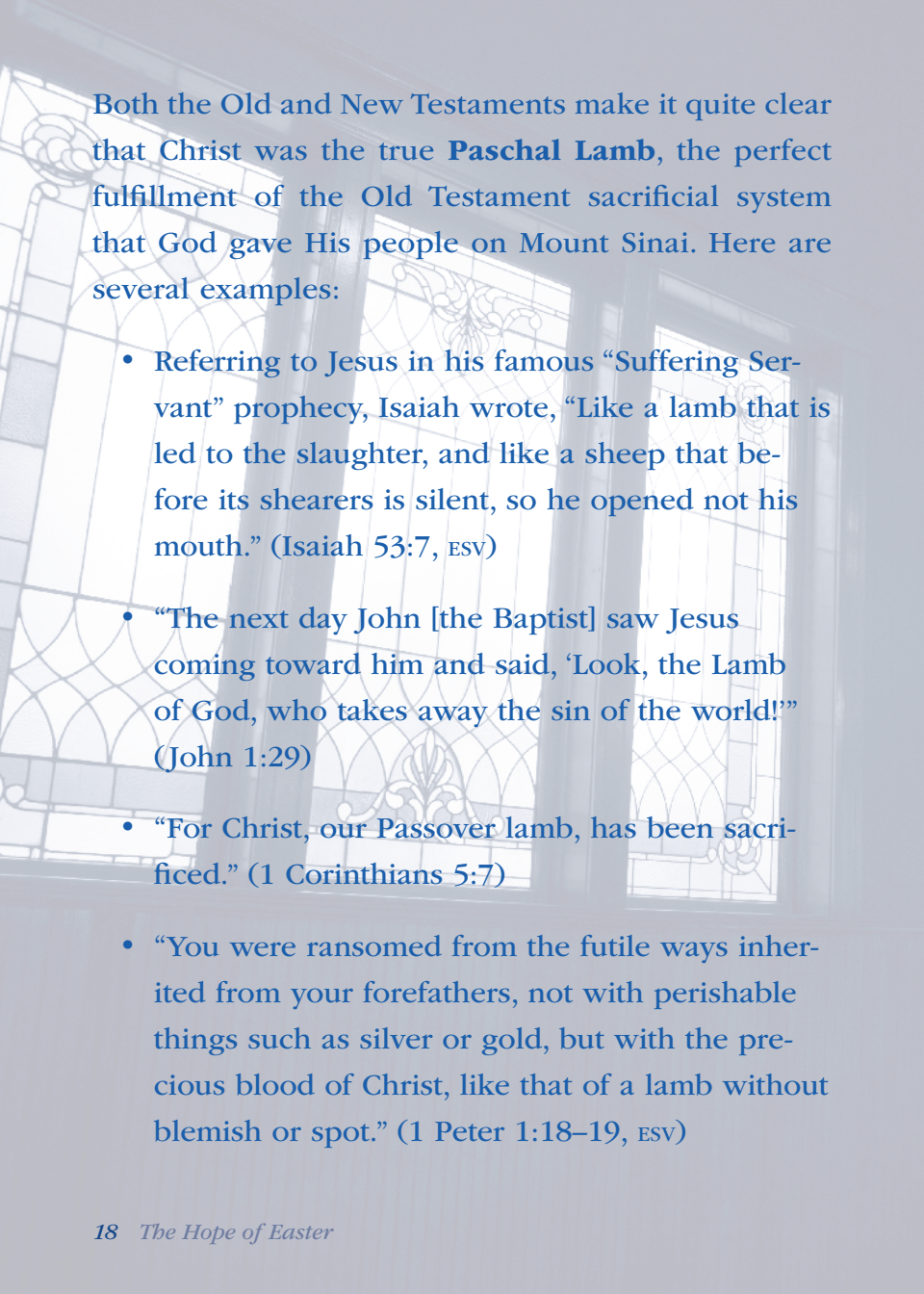
The first Passover coincided with the last of the ten plagues—the death of every firstborn male in Egypt—that God inflicted upon Israel’s captors to free His people. For Israel to avoid this terrible judgment, God required a blood sacrifice. He commanded every Israelite family to slaughter an unblemished one-year-old male lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorposts on

their house. Later that night, as God brought justice upon Egypt, He saw the lamb's blood on each Hebrew dwelling and withheld judgment, **passing over** those houses in mercy.

As Exodus 12:12–13 says:

*On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*

Why did God call for Israel to perform this unique ritual? Why couldn't He have just spared the Jews without the slaughter of thousands of lambs? Ultimately, the ceremony foreshadowed God's Son, Jesus Christ, and His sacrifice on the cross for the sins of mankind.



Both the Old and New Testaments make it quite clear that Christ was the true **Paschal Lamb**, the perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system that God gave His people on Mount Sinai. Here are several examples:

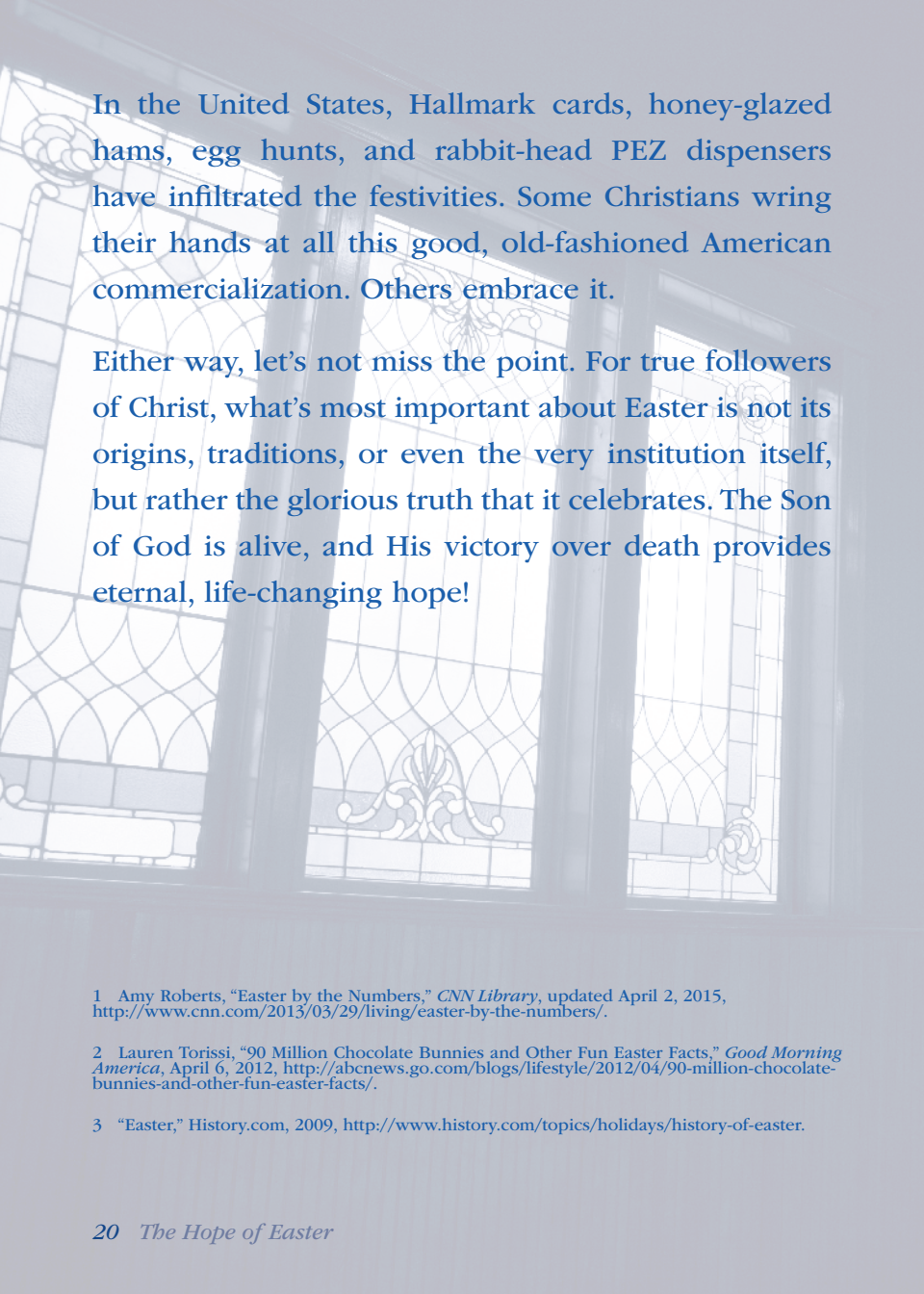
- Referring to Jesus in his famous “Suffering Servant” prophecy, Isaiah wrote, “Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7, ESV)
- “The next day John [the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29)
- “For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” (1 Corinthians 5:7)
- “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” (1 Peter 1:18–19, ESV)



That the Messiah was crucified during Passover week (John 19:14) was no accident. Jesus was making a powerfully tacit statement in revealing Himself as the perfect fulfillment of Old Testament Law—a point the apostles did not miss in their New Testament writings.

After the early church started, following the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the first Christians (literally, “Christ followers”) started gathering together for weekly worship services on Sundays, or “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10), to honor the day on which the resurrection occurred. Eventually, believers started commemorating Christ’s triumph over death with an annual festival we now call Easter.

These days, most churches in the western hemisphere celebrate Easter anywhere between March 22 and April 25, while Eastern Orthodox churches usually observe it a week or two later. Over the centuries, a wide variety of Easter traditions—some solemn, many strange—have sprung up. In Sweden, girls dress up like witches and go trick-or-treating. In Bermuda, people fly kites on Good Friday to signify Jesus’ ascension. And in Venezuela and Greece, people burn effigies of Judas Iscariot.<sup>3</sup>



In the United States, Hallmark cards, honey-glazed hams, egg hunts, and rabbit-head PEZ dispensers have infiltrated the festivities. Some Christians wring their hands at all this good, old-fashioned American commercialization. Others embrace it.

Either way, let's not miss the point. For true followers of Christ, what's most important about Easter is not its origins, traditions, or even the very institution itself, but rather the glorious truth that it celebrates. The Son of God is alive, and His victory over death provides eternal, life-changing hope!

1 Amy Roberts, "Easter by the Numbers," *CNN Library*, updated April 2, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/03/29/living/easter-by-the-numbers/>.

2 Lauren Torissi, "90 Million Chocolate Bunnies and Other Fun Easter Facts," *Good Morning America*, April 6, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2012/04/90-million-chocolate-bunnies-and-other-fun-easter-facts/>.

3 "Easter," *History.com*, 2009, <http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/history-of-easter>.









## CHAPTER 2

# THE NEED FOR SALVATION

Why do we need hope?

Sure, life has its challenges—some of them quite significant—but all in all, things often have a way of working themselves out, right? So what's the big deal? Are we in some sort of imminent danger from an alien invasion, perhaps? Or an army of zombies? A modern-day bubonic plague? A giant meteor hurtling toward earth? Higher taxes? Another **Rocky** movie?

The hope of Easter addresses a completely different problem. To understand this hope—and why we desperately need it—we must go back to the very beginning. To paradise.

“In the beginning,” Genesis 1:1 says, “God created the heavens and the earth.” This is where the hope of Easter starts. If we fail to accept the truth of divine creation, everything else is meaningless.

The universe was not a random explosion of microscopic particles that somehow evolved over billions of years into the ordered cosmos we marvel at today. Our ancestors were **not** infinitesimal organisms that somehow survived a raging primordial soup. The universe and everything in it, including humans, came from a loving, personal Creator. As Psalm 139:13–14 says, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

When God spoke the universe into existence, it was perfect. Because He is holy, omniscient, and all-powerful, God cannot make anything evil or blemished. All of creation flawlessly reflected His glory. After each of the six days of creation, God surveyed what He had miraculously wrought and “saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:10).

This perfection extended to the first man and woman, the magnum opus of God’s breathtaking handiwork. He made humans to fellowship with Him, worship Him, and spread His glory in His vast universe. But God didn’t want to interact with mere robots—mindless automatons whose obedience was strictly the re-



sult of initial hardwiring. So in His divine wisdom and sovereignty, He created flesh-and-blood creatures in His own image (Genesis 1:27). He gave minds, hearts, and free wills to His image-bearers so they could choose to love and obey their Creator of their own volition and fully enter into worship.

God dearly loved Adam and Eve. He blessed them with every delight and enjoyed intimate fellowship with them, even condescending to walk and speak with them among the Garden of Eden's beauty (Genesis 3:8).

But Adam and Eve made a disastrous choice. They chose to reject their Creator's loving rule over them. Deceived by Satan, God's ancient adversary who was disguised as a crafty serpent, they arrogantly ate some fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had expressly forbidden. As Genesis 3:6 says, "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."



Adam and Eve's willful rejection of God's command ushered sin into the world. Like a devastating pestilence, sin marred God's perfect creation and caused a cataclysmic rift between the Creator and the created. Sadness, shame, pain, sickness, hate, and—worst of all—death became realities. God cast Adam and Eve out of Eden. Paradise—perfect, intimate fellowship between the heavenly Father and His children—was lost.

The aftermath of sin didn't end with Adam and Eve, though. Sin's curse has extended to every human being in history. The whole world, in fact, is accountable to God (Romans 3:19).

As Adam's seed, we all have inherited a sinful nature and stand guilty before God from the time we are born. Put it this way: When it comes to human culpability, there is no Switzerland. Neutral ground doesn't exist. As Romans 5:18 says, "One trespass resulted in condemnation for all people." Many other Scripture references affirm this, including these:

- "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5)

- “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.” (Romans 3:10–11)
- “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

Sin’s immediate consequences are spiritual alienation from God and ultimately death. Romans 6:23 explains that “the wages of sin is death,” and Romans 5:12 says, “So death spread to all men because all sinned” (ESV). Likewise, Ephesians 2:3 says, “Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.”

The Bible clearly states that God’s final judgment against unregenerate sinners is eternal separation from Him and punishment in hell. The descriptions of hell in Scripture are frightening:

- “Outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12, *ESV*)
- A “blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42)
- A place where “the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever” and “there will be no rest day or night” (Revelation 14:11)



- A “lake of fire” and “the second death” (Revelation 20:14)

Many people take offense to the notion of hell. How, they ask, can a loving God sentence people to such a terrible fate? But this attitude fails to acknowledge a simple but vital fact: We are the created, not the Creator. God makes the rules. If it weren't for Him, we wouldn't even exist. The apostle Paul addressed this when he wrote in Romans 9:14–24:

*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,  
“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I  
have compassion.”*

*It does not, therefore, depend on  
human desire or effort, but on God's  
mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: “I  
raised you up for this very purpose, that  
I might display my power in you and  
that my name might be proclaimed in all  
the earth.” Therefore God has mercy on*



*whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*

*One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?*

*What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

This is a difficult truth. It requires a shift from the prevalent humanistic mind-set to accepting this vital fact: God owes us nothing. As the eternal, all-powerful, omniscient Creator, God possesses divine prerogative over all matters in His creation. It's His world, He makes the rules, and we have to be okay with that.

But the existence of hell and God's wrath against sin isn't just about divine rights. It's also about God's character. Because He is just and holy (perfectly righteous, morally pure, and set apart from anything in creation), God's nature **requires** that sin be punished. Sin is an affront to God's glory and righteousness. To **not** punish sin would violate God's justice and, in fact, His very essence.

As such, God would have fully been within His rights to utterly forsake His creation and abandon us to sin's deadly corruption. But He didn't! That's the beauty of Romans 6:23, mentioned above. It starts with bad news ("For the wages of sin is death . . ."), but ends with this glorious truth: "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

There is hope for fallen mankind! God's justice is perfectly balanced with love and grace. Immediately after

the Fall, God mercifully intertwined a hint of coming salvation with pronouncements of judgment. During His curse on Satan, God declared, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). The woman’s “offspring” was Jesus. This was a foreshadowing of messianic redemption!

Bear in mind this, too: sin’s entrée didn’t catch God by surprise. When Adam and Eve rebelled, God didn’t hastily convene a heavenly crisis response subcommittee. Human events don’t startle or stun God. He never switches to plan B. The Fall was completely within His control because He is sovereign (2 Samuel 7:22), holy (Leviticus 19:2), eternal (Deuteronomy 33:27), all-knowing (1 John 3:20), and all-powerful (Jeremiah 32:17).

God, in fact, put His wondrous plan of salvation in motion in what theologians call “eternity past,” that mysterious epoch that predates creation. At the center of God the Father’s plan was the incarnation of God the Son. Jesus did not begin in the Bethlehem manger. As the second Person of the triune God, Jesus has



always existed. Colossians 1:15 affirms His eternal nature when it says He is “the firstborn over all creation.” Likewise, John 1:1 says of Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Revelation 1:18 concurs when it says that Jesus is “alive for ever and ever!”

Pause for a moment and reflect on what you’ve just read. Are you amazed by God’s love for you? Are you astounded by the scope of this cosmic rescue mission that exceeds the bounds of time? You should be! But wait. There’s more . . .

When God set His salvation plan in motion in eternity past, He didn’t stop at anointing His own Son as the vehicle of redemption. He sovereignly selected the recipients of that Christ-fueled grace. As Ephesians 1:4–5 says, “He chose us in him **before** the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (emphasis added). Likewise, 2 Timothy 1:9 says that God’s “grace was given us in Christ Jesus **before** the beginning of time” (emphasis added). Long before the world began, God predestined many to receive His love and forgiveness (Romans 8:29–30; 2 Thesalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:1–2). This, in part, explains

why the apostle John was overwhelmed with joyful awe when he exclaimed in 1 John 3:1, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”

To convey this marvelous reconciliation plan to mankind, God first selected a man named Abraham, whom He promised to make into a great nation, Israel, and bless all the peoples of earth (Genesis 12:1–3). For centuries, the Lord showered His love on Israel and spoke to His people through godly prophets in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, He used the apostles to speak His truth.

This is how the Bible, God’s Word, came into being. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is comprised of sixty-six books written by approximately forty authors over at least thirteen hundred years. But it’s not a random, outdated collection of ancient laws, legends, proverbs, and poetry. It is the inerrant, inspired Word of God, divinely breathed into existence through the pens of human authors to record how heaven’s message of hope has unfolded throughout history.

As 2 Timothy 3:16 states, “All Scripture is God-



breathed.” Second Peter 1:20–21 puts it this way: “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The Bible tells a cohesive—and still perfectly relevant—story of hope through the saving work of God’s Son. From the earliest pages of the Old Testament, implicit whispers of Jesus—and many explicit shouts—fill the Scriptures. Jesus Himself testified after His resurrection that “Moses and all the Prophets” bore witness to Him (Luke 24:27).

We see allusions to the coming Messiah in the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22; John 1:29), the Passover (Exodus 12), the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:4–9; John 3:14), and the life of Jonah (Matthew 12:38–40), to name a few. Christ appears in hundreds of Old Testament prophecies that provide details on everything from the place of His birth (Micah 5:2) to His crucifixion (Psalm 34:20) to His eternal reign (Daniel 7:12–13). God even used ancient Israel’s long history of spiritual unfaithfulness to point ahead to the Messiah in pas-





sages such as Isaiah 9, Jeremiah 33, and Ezekiel 37.

Then . . . silence. After Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, God provided no spoken or written word for more than four hundred years. The Jews waited . . . and waited . . . and waited for the promised Deliverer. In the meantime, the world was changing rapidly. Great empires rose and fell with alarming speed. Yet it seemed like the Lord's redemption would never come.

But hope was on the way.