Believe: How Do I Have a Relationship With God?
Luke 15:11-32

We are on week three of our BELIEVE series where we are looking deeply into the 10 core beliefs of the Christian faith as we find in the scripture. To unpack these beliefs, we are utilizing Pastor Randy Frazee’s book entitled, BELIEVE. Each chapter of the BELIEVE book addresses one of the big questions that every person is asking. Last week we dealt with the question, “Does God care about my life?” This week we are addressing the question: “How do I have a relationship with God?”

Let me first speak to the question. It is a very good question…it is the correct question to be asking. However, let’s be honest for a moment: many of us are not actually asking this question, are we? In fact, I suspect that many of us have never asked this question, “How do I have a relationship with God?” Instead, most us have likely asked the question: How do I avoid hell when I die? Or, how can I get God’s blessing? How can I get out the mess that I’m in? How can I become a better person? How can I leverage God to…(fill in the blank): get healthy, get wealthy, get power, get better, get justice, get happy, get married, get children, get, get, get?

If we are really being honest, the average human being is not all that interested in a relationship with God…we are much more interested in GETTING and ENJOYING God’s stuff, and if we could somehow do that without a relationship with God…all the better. Now…why is that?

The Problem
Well…that leads me to the first point of my message today, and that is THE PROBLEM. When we look in the mirror we discover that which the Bible explains quite clearly, which is this observation: we are helplessly selfish creatures. We want what we can’t have. We want what we haven’t earned. We want what doesn’t belong to us. We want what we want, and we want it without restriction and without limits. When I say “we,” I mean WE…me and you and all of us.

Now, why are we that way? We learn in Genesis 1 and 2 that God, having created man in his image, places him in paradise with an invitation to enjoy all the produce of the garden, but God places one singular restriction upon Adam. Let’s pick up the story in Genesis 2:15: The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” God then creates Eve, and the story continues in Genesis 3:1: Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?”’ And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But
the serpent said to the woman, “You will surely not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

This story in Genesis represents what theologians describe as the “The Fall.” Man was tempted by a lie…the promise of God-like autonomy, and that led to disobedience against God. Man’s disobedience and rebellion brought on a curse upon the sons and daughters of Adam, and that has been our situation ever since.

Now, why did Adam and Eve sin against God? Was that inevitable? Where did the “serpent” come from? If that is Satan, why would God allow Satan an opportunity to lie to Adam and Eve? Did Adam’s sin come as a surprise to God? Those are all excellent questions, but I do not have time to address them all at this time. One of the best books I’ve read on this subject is a book entitled: Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin by Cornelius Plantinga. I strongly recommend you read that book if you would like to dig into some of these questions with more thoroughness.

Genesis 3 depicts the “fall” of humanity that happened early in human history, but that’s not the only place in scripture that the human dilemma is articulated.

Paul writes about the selfish and self-deceiving nature of humanity as he articulates the human dilemma in Romans 1:18-25 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. 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…

Paul states our problem succinctly: Our problem is that we have exchanged the truth for a lie; we have worshiped the creation over the Creator; and consequently, the wrath of God awaits us. Notice that Paul articulates the source of the problem: They became futile in their thinking…Wrong thinking about God leads to idolatry, which is ultimately the source of our sin. A. W. Tozier, in his book The Knowledge of the Holy, writes:
Among the sins to which the human heart is prone, hardly any other is more hateful to God than idolatry, for idolatry is at bottom a libel on His character. The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is—in itself a monstrous sin—and substitutes for the true God one made after his own likeness. Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind…wrong ideas about God are not only the fountain from which the polluted waters of idolatry flow; they are themselves idolatrous. The idolater simply imagines things about God and acts as if they were true.

So…what happens when human beings exchange the truth for a lie and worship their “imaginary version of god” over God as He actually is? As God promised in Genesis 2, our sin against God leads to death. Paul writes in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory…” He goes on to write in Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death…” Why does sin carry such a steep penalty? Is it because God is so ruthless as to punish wrongdoers with a massive sledgehammer for simply making a mistake? No…it is because our sin causes us to be separated from God.

Let us look to the Gospel of Luke to hear how Jesus presents our dilemma. In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of two sons. The older son is compliant, works hard, and prides himself on being “good.” However, we learn that his hard work and compliance is a means to an end: He wants his father’s farm, and he’s hopeful that by being good enough, he can finally get his father’s stuff…though the older brother cares little for the Father himself as we see later in the story. The younger son, however, is far more explicit and transparent about his desire for the father’s stuff. Let’s pick up the story there in Luke 15:12: The younger of them said, “Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me.” And [the Father] divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

Do you see a consistent narrative about the problem of our human nature? From Genesis 3, to Romans 1, to here in Luke 15, the narrative is the same: as human beings, we are inherently selfish creatures who constantly desire the Father’s stuff rather than a relationship with the Father. Every time we choose the creation over the Creator, every time we give ourselves over to our home-spun version of “god” rather than God Himself, it leads to our isolation. In Genesis 3, the consequence of sin is that Adam and Eve are estranged from God, they are cast out of Eden, and everything becomes harder. In Romans 3, those who exchanged the truth for a lie become slaves to their own appetites and they are all the more blinded from the truth. In Luke 15, the selfishness of the younger son leads him to be far away from his Father. In fact, we learn
later in that story that as far as the Father is concerned, His son is now lost to him…it is as though the son has died.

Such is why it would be theologically and biblically accurate to sum up our problem with a simple metaphor: our problem is that we are spiritual orphans. Our sin has separated us from God…we find ourselves alone and “fatherless” in our existence on earth. We all have a longing for HOME…a sneaking suspicion that we were made for something other than the way we are living our lives now. It is a longing that bears witness to the biblical notion that we were made in God’s image—we were made to be in a relationship with our Creator, but that relationship has been frustrated by sin.

Now…let me ask you a question: does the biblical worldview account for how things are, beginning with the person you see each day in the mirror? Does it account for the ache for home that we all feel? Does it account for our rebellious nature that wants absolute sovereignty without condition and without restriction? Yes, it does. So—now we know the problem.

II. The Solution
Let us now look to THE SOLUTION that we find in scripture. The ultimate solution to our human dilemma is to have a restored relationship with the God who is there…the God who is Holy, the God of heaven and earth, our True Father who loves us. By the way, that was always the plan…that men and women would live in a loving, dependent relationship with God.

So how do we enter into a relationship with the One True God when everything in our lives is so screwed up?

The solution to our problem is found not in what we can do, but in what God has already done.

Immediately following the fall that we read about in Genesis 3, we begin to see that God already has a plan for how He will redeem the world back to Himself. The Liar will be crushed by the offspring of Eve…one who will reverse the curse of Adam. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament that includes history, poetry, and prophecy over the course of 1500 years, God’s plan of redemption begins to take shape. One of the first images that points to God’s redemptive plan is the Passover that takes place in Egypt. In Exodus 11 we read about the tenth and final plague that God sends upon Egypt for their sin against God and Pharaoh’s unwillingness to liberate the Israelites. God will send the Destroyer who will kill every firstborn son among the Egyptians, but the Israelites are to be spared. However, in order for the people of God to be spared from the angel of death, they are instructed to kill an unblemished lamb and paint their doorposts with the blood of the innocent lamb. Then, when the Destroyer comes and sees the blood of the lamb, the people will be spared. 1500 years before Jesus, God is revealing that His plan of salvation will require the life an Innocent One, a Blameless One, who will serve as a “sacrificial lamb”…one
will satisfy God’s justice so that those who are covered by the blood of the lamb will be forgiven and spared.

There are myriads of other signs that point to God’s redemptive plan throughout the Old Testament, but none more explicitly than the prophecies of Isaiah. Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words:

3 He was despised and rejected[d] by men, a man of sorrows[e] and acquainted with[f] grief;[g] and as one from whom men hide their faces[h] he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; 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.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief;[l] when his soul makes[i] an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see[k] and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 

12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,[l] and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,[m] because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

God’s plan of redemption will come in the form of a man…a servant of God…one who will commit no iniquities, and yet one that will bear the iniquities of us all. Has history ever met such a man—a man who meets the descriptions and fulfills the role prophesied by Isaiah?

When we turn to the four gospels and the witness of the New Testament, we learn of Jesus of Nazareth…a child conceived by the Holy Spirit and born to a peasant virgin named Mary. One whom the Apostle John describes as the Word of God made flesh. Jesus is born into the world as a human, but John helps us to understand that Jesus, the Word, was with God and was God at the beginning…even before time began. John writes that “all things were made through Him.” And yet, “though being in the very nature God,” Paul writes in Philippians 2, “he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus is God’s solution to our human dilemma. When Jesus entered the world, He came as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” according to John the Baptist. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:21 that “God made Him to be sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus comes as the Passover Lamb, and it is his perfect blood shed on a Roman cross that once and for all serves as the atoning sacrifice for human sin.
In Ephesians 2 Paul writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

In Jesus Christ, because He died the death we deserve…and because He rose again and conquered death once and for all…in Jesus Christ we have the ONLY WAY to be restored in our relationship with God.

(Optional as time allows)
Some of you were a bit concerned about Randy Frazee referring to God’s plan of redemption as God’s “Plan B.” I don’t want to spend a lot of time here, but let us acknowledge the linear perception of history that we operate on as created, human beings. From a linear perspective, we would have to acknowledge the possibility that Adam and Eve might never choose to sin and rebel against God if, in fact, they were created as truly free creatures. To that extent God’s original intent in creation from our linear perspective might be thought of as God’s Plan A. However, we know that God is infinite, and we know that God has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus was never a plan B, and God was not surprised or caught off guard by man’s rebellion. It hurts our brains to think about how that all works, but rest assured that Jesus…who was present with the Father and the Holy Spirit at the formation of the world, is not an afterthought of God made necessary by a last-minute change of plans. Jesus has always been and will always be our Savior, but we could only come to know Him as Immanuel…God With Us…by his entrance onto the human stage at exactly the right moment, and that is what we have recorded in the New Testament.

Our Response
Now, we have identified the problem…we are spiritual orphans. We have identified the solution: God sent Jesus into the world to save the world through His sacrificial death on a cross and His victory over death marked by his resurrection on the third day. In Jesus, God made a way for us to have a restored relationship with our Father in heaven…in Jesus, we can be forgiven and redeemed.
So, given that we are free creatures, what must we do in response? The Apostle Peter sums up our necessary response in Acts 2:38, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.”

To have a relationship with God, we must first repent. To repent means to turn around in every sense of the word. It means to change our minds with every intent of changing our behavior. Now…listen closely to what I said: repentance begins with a change in the way we think. Instead of persisting with our lies and self-delusion, we yield to the TRUTH of what God has revealed in His Word—both the written Word of God’s self-revelation, and the WORD who is Jesus Christ. As we’ve already noted, our behavior follows our thinking, so true repentance will begin with a transformed mind and lead to new behaviors over time.

Repentance is not a one-time transaction, it is a posture before God that will be part of the believer’s life until we are finally home and fully restored into a sinless existence. Repentance leads to humility, learning, and growth as we allow ourselves to be transformed into the likeness of Christ over time. That transformation comes when we receive the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity…who comes and dwells within us, changing us from the inside out. Historically the coming of the Holy Spirit has been associated with our submission to Christian baptism, but we know that our baptism serves as an outward sign of what is already taking place within in our hearts.

So…our response…our next step for entering into a relationship with God, is to repent and to place our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ as we would place our faith in a parachute as we exit a plane doomed for destruction. We should submit to Christian baptism if we have never been baptized, and we should welcome the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and yield to His work within our lives.

If we respond to God’s invitation to be in a restored relationship with Him through Jesus, something remarkable will happen in our lives…it is actually the most remarkable thing that we can experience on this planet: we will become Children of God. We will come to know ourselves as God’s adopted children, and we will enjoy access to an intimate, personal relationship with our True Father. That relationship is so intimate, that we are invited to call God…the Creator and Lord of all the space and time…Abba…Papa. Paul writes in Romans 8, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”
It is true that the life of a Christian…a Child of God…in this evil age is not a cake walk. There will be times when we will suffer with Christ…we will stand opposed to the lies of our ancient enemy…we will stick out like a city on a hill. Darkness hates light, and so the life of a Jesus-follower is one that requires faithfulness and endurance in these difficult days. But set your minds upon the promise found in scripture: as children of God, we are also heirs…we will share in the inheritance of Jesus. We will know our Father and have an intimate relationship with Him. And when we breathe our last, we will go home…and the longing of our aching hearts will once and for all be satisfied.

This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ…it is the hope of the world…and it is the only way to have a relationship with God. If you do not know yourself to be a child of God who has an intimate relationship with our Father in heaven, I bid you to repent this morning…change your mind…agree with God regarding your condition, and place your faith in the Only One who died in your place. Let us pray.