

The Birth of Religion

*What Really Happened in Eden and What Does It
Mean Today*



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Introduction

“Religion” is an interesting word. If you are actively involved in a faith walk with Jesus, there is a fair chance that your friends and family would refer to you as “religious.” You may even refer to yourself that way.

Frankly, religion does not have such a great reputation. Religion is often blamed for some of history’s darkest times. You would think a quest for God would be a quest for goodness. But it often does not work that way.

So, the concept of religion is controversial. In some people’s mind, religion is a terrible thing. Why is that? Let us explore.

So, what is religion? When I typed that question into Microsoft Bing, the AI response I got was:

Religion is a complex and multifaceted concept that generally involves a system of beliefs, practices, and values centered around the worship of a higher power or powers. It often includes rituals, moral codes, and texts considered sacred.

The three components listed: *rituals, moral codes, and texts considered sacred* all have something in common. They all represent a human striving to appease a Deity. Violate any of those three components and you have an angry Deity and a price to pay.

So, does faith as represented in the Bible fit that religious paradigm? It is an interesting question. In this study, we are going to make a distinction between faith and religion. It is a distinction that I believe the Bible makes and that was clear in the mind of Jesus.

Religion is not new. It is as old as Eden. Yet religion was not part of God’s original creation.

Let us put the conclusion into the introduction and as we progress, see how we do:

- Religion was established in the Garden of Eden at the fall.
- Satan orchestrated the original sin and the subsequent fall of man (although there is a God mercy involved).
- It is built into our fallen human experience.
- Religion stands in stark contrast to faith, which was restored at the cross.

With that in mind, religion could be defined as: **The guilty heart of man responding to man’s perception of an offended God. God is viewed through the eyes of guilt. It is not a clear nor accurate vision of God, of life, or of ourselves. Ultimately, religion is a problem, not a solution.**

Let us see how we do!

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Chapter 1 The Garden

Read Genesis 2 (The text is included in Appendix A)

A good place to start any sort of pondering is at the beginning. So let us go back to creation and then on to the garden. There are two things specifically mentioned about God's creation of man that are so big and so important that they stand well beyond what we can understand and comprehend. The first is in Genesis 1:26 where God proclaims: "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." God's image...what does that mean? In our fallen state, can we really get our minds around what that means or looks like? At best, all we get are glimpses. I do not think that can be overstated. The other part of this is, we really cannot comprehend the experiences of Adam and Eve in their unfallen state. We know they were in complete unity with all of creation. They were in a complete and perfect relationship with each other. They were also in complete fellowship with God that was personal and interactive. They walked and talked with God. That certainly is not our experience, or even our mindset. We attempt to envision it, but all we get is a vague glimpse—if even that.

Adam and Eve also possessed innocence, self-assurance, purity of thought, and purity of action. They only have one bad choice they could make (get to that later). They had complete freedom of living with total liberty in their thoughts and actions. I do not think we can even imagine what that was like. What makes this interesting as we move deeper into this study...Adam and Eve did not have to discern. Every choice (except one) they made was a good one because there was no evil to befall them. Imagine being able to make any choice you wanted...and it was always the right choice. You have seen the bumper sticker...No Bad Days. Imagine instead...No Bad Choices!

The second aspect of creation that stands out in all of this is: God looked at his creation which, in its components, He declared as good. More profoundly, God saw man as the exceptional aspect that tied it all together. Now take it one step further as God called it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). That statement should send shivers down our spine. When the all-powerful eternal God looks at something He did, stands back, admires what He did, and then declares it exceptional...we should take note.

So, God created a masterpiece of which He was proud. He interacted with His creation. The people He created knew Him personally. They understood God as He is. They were drawn to God. Everything existed in peace. There was no religion. Frankly, there was not a faith based on what is "not seen" as described in Hebrews 10:1, but an existence based on a relationship that was both seen and experienced. This is the scene just prior to the birth of religion.

In chapter 2, we will do a bit of a deep dive into how religion was born and how it destroyed paradise.

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Thought to ponder: If Eden's paradise were to become your home, what is the one thing you would enjoy or appreciate the most?

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Chapter 2 A Sinister Truth

Read Genesis 3 (The text is included in Appendix B)

In the last chapter we left God's perfect creation capped off with God's ultimate creation... humankind. Those made in His perfect image are living in perfect harmony in the perfect environment. His image bearers are in perfect fellowship and harmony with their creator. It is intimate, gratifying, and meaningful to both God and his created human image bearers. There is no religion to be found in the garden, simply perfect communion. As good as this sounds, from our side of the fall, we cannot understand a fraction of what that environment was really like. We just know it was amazingly beyond comprehension...amazingly and profoundly good!

Now enter Satan the adversary, disguised as the serpent. I suspect most of us are snake averse... I know I am. But the impression I get is that the serpent in the garden was an intriguing, compelling, and beautiful creature. I am speculating that this creature had been bounding around the garden for quite some time before we got to the events of Genesis 3, making it familiar and compelling. Genesis 3:1 uses the word "crafty" to describe the serpent. The Hebrew word translated "crafty" is interesting. It really means "prudent" but becomes "crafty" when used in a negative context. So, based on the words used you could deduce that Eve perceived the serpent as smart and wise. Thus, the deception begins. The serpent begins by questioning what God really said and then refuting what God really said.

The part of this that I want to focus on is this statement by the serpent:

For God knows that in the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing **good** and **evil**. Genesis 3:5

That statement is loaded. It was not really a lie. It was true, but in a very sinister way. Let us analyze that statement. When we read "good" we may be tempted to apply our definition of religious "good" to the word. In that sense we tend to define good as the absence of bad. A good person does not do bad things. But that is not what is happening here. It is a complicated word being used, but it could be defined as what brings pleasure. In other words, God is keeping you from all the fun stuff. Does that sound familiar? The idea is that God is limiting them from all forms of pleasure. By removing that limitation, life really happens. I can do whatever I want however I want...no limitations. Taken to the extremes, it becomes licentious.

The other word used is evil. The Hebrew word used carries much the same connotation as our English word for evil. Here is where it gets interesting. Moses used this word to describe what it means to violate the Ten Commandments he had just been given by God (Deuteronomy 30:19):

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¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and **curses**.

The word translated as “evil” in Genesis 3:5 is translated as “curses” in Deuteronomy 30:19. It carries the concept of the implication of doing wrong. If breaking the rule is the cause, then the effect of it is the “curse.”

So evil here can be described as the violation of God’s commands and the implications. That is the essence of legalism.

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they got exactly what had been promised them by the serpent. They got the continuum of *legalism to license*. Where the catch comes, they lost their innocent world view that put them in complete harmony with all of creation, each other, and with God. The real shame is that they lost the capacity for it. Reflect on that for a moment: Adam & Eve lost their capacity to see God as He is. They got what the serpent promised, a mindset of “good and evil.” They lost everything else. What they really received was slavery to the *legalism to license* continuum. Thus, religion was born.

In chapter 3, we will explore the impact of that world view and its implications.

In Appendix C I have included a theological summary of the concepts of *Original Sin* and *Total Depravity*. This would be a good spot in the narrative to review those concepts.

Thought to ponder: Using your sanctified imagination, what do you think Adam and Eve missed most from their former garden experience?

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Chapter 3 Religion Is Born

In the last chapter we saw Satan disguised as the Serpent deceiving Adam & Eve with a proposition that was true but cost them everything to obtain. The proposition of “knowing good and evil” was in fact not a good thing at all. They were living perfectly innocent in an environment where evil did not exist, and they were existing saturated with the goodness of God. Knowing evil was not necessary. They were already experiencing goodness as dispensed freely by God Himself. The serpent’s proposition was an empty promise.

The lie in the serpent’s promise was a lie of omission. They got the promise of knowing good and evil, but it cost them everything. They lost their innocence, their God provided world view, access to their garden paradise, their perfect relationship with each other, and their perfect relationship with God. What they gained was a life and world perspective based on good and evil, the *legalism to licentious* continuum. That world view exists in the realm of death. Remember, when God warned Adam & Eve about the Tree of Good & Evil, He warned them that death was the consequence of eating (Genesis 2:17). Within the realm of death, they got religion in exchange for relationship with God. As descendants of Adam & Eve, that is our lot as well.

Everything that happened with Adam & Eve shortly after eating the fruit can be viewed in a religious light. They hid (Genesis 3:8-10), they covered up (Genesis 3:7), something had to die (Genesis 3:21), they turned on each other Genesis 3:12), and the relationship with God was broken as they became confrontational with God. I am not going to flesh that out here, but understand that from that moment on, all of us humankind became driven by religion as part of our core being. Remember our definition of religion is: The guilty heart of man responding to man’s perception of an offended God.

This gets quite complicated, but I would suggest we can boil this down to two ingredients. First, after the fall, humankind was unable to see God as He is apart from God’s supernatural intervening. Second, our fallen nature is only capable of seeing God as operating on the legalism to license continuum. In other words, our core nature became religious, not God relational. This is dark. In fact, this is so dark that only God can fix it. Spoiler alert...God does fix it!

I have led studies through the book of Romans several times in the past few years. I always start the study with a question: Where on the *legalism to license* continuum should we place ourselves to find balance? Obviously if you have followed this study this far you recognize this as a trick question. Yet, every person on the planet in some form is asking that question AND is evaluating the world around them with that same criterion. In that sense religion sits at the very essence of our being and defines who we are.

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In the next study we will explore the pervasive nature of the legalism to license continuum. In other words, we are going to examine religion.

Thought to ponder: How does religion sometimes drive people away from an honest and true perception of God?

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Chapter 4 The Road with No Off Ramp

The history of religion can be summed up as a slide up and down the legalism to license continuum. It really does not matter what religious belief system you are dealing with...it all responds the same way. There is an acceptable pattern of what you can do and cannot do. There is also tension between the two. There is a reward if you fit within the acceptable pattern and punishment if you do not. At the top of this hierarchy is a God who administers it who must be appeased. Often, rejection of the religious system has something to do with not wanting to be limited...the sinners are having all the fun. That really does sum it all up.

As fallen people, we are bound to the continuum. A move towards God tends to be a move towards legalism. There is a God given reason for this. God, in His mercy, gave us the continuum to provide order from the chaos of the fall. God did provide the Ten Commandments, not to mention the myriads of laws given in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. God is a Law giver, and the Law was good (Romans 7:12). The Law was also written on our hearts (Romans 2:15). So, the very nature of goodness is expressed in legalistic terms and is part of our soul. But so is the licentious side. We want what we want, and we want to do what we want to do. We do not want to be restrained but we also recognize that our unrestrained nature goes to very evil places. One of the most chilling verses in all Scripture is the last verse in the book Judges: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." That is the motivating driver for everything wrong and evil in the world.

Remember, all of this is happening within the realm of death...the fallen world and state we are all born into. This is the way the world works, and this is the way religion works. Even those who do not view themselves as "religious" evaluate the world in the same legalism to license way. They just call it a "moral compass" or other such term. But regardless, it is the religious nature of man playing itself out.

The other aspect of this is the tension between legalism and license. We do not want to be restrained, but we do not want the chaos and destructive operators that unrestrained license gives us. So, religious systems are set up with God being appeased sitting on the legalistic end of the spectrum. We move towards God by doing better things. It tends to be a bit of a sliding scale. If the good outweighs the bad, then God tends to be happier (and vice versa). Religion is a horrible treadmill because God is never totally appeased. It also runs against our nature of not wanting to be restrained so we are always looking for loopholes.

Society itself runs up and down the continuum. Where you place yourself on the continuum determines how you would like to see society operate. If you are someone who feels society is repressive and filled with silly rules, then you are a little closer to the licentious side of the spectrum. If society feels like God has been abandoned and everything seems out of control,

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then you are sitting closer to the legalistic side of the spectrum. Of course, it is way more complicated than this. But this is the concept that seems to drive just about everything.

There is a genuine God component in all this which I really have not addressed. There also is a genuine moral right and wrong that plays out as well. We are deep in the mire right now. In the next chapter we will bring God into the equation.

Thought to ponder: Can you think of a time in place or history where legalism was the law of the land? How did that affect life in that cultural moment?

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Chapter 5 The Good and The Bad

Our studies thus far have not been so much about God, but about us. You would think a discussion about religion would center on God, which would be a near consensus view. But it is not that simple. I recently saw a picture of the Astoria Megler bridge which sits at the mouth of the Columbia River, shot from an angle looking across the bridge to the other side of the river in the fog. The bridge appears to just disappear into the fog. Within the context of religion, God just seems to disappear into the fog.

So, when we bring God into the equation, we need to look at it two ways. The first has to do with God accommodating our fallen state. The other has to do with God fixing our fallen state. These are two entirely different things. Much Christian teaching and practice puts these two ingredients in the bowl and mixes them up. That is a cake you do not want to eat. God in His mercy made accommodation for our fallen state. God In His great wisdom and love fixed the problem. Again, these are vastly different things.

As mentioned in an earlier study, God provided the Law as a contrast and counterbalance to the chaos and self-destructive aspect of our fallen licentious nature. The continuum was *God provided* to allow us humans to be able to exist together. Think of all the violence, wars, and evil doings throughout history. Now imagine that without the restraint of a moral code. So, God accommodated our fallen nature. But the giving of the Law did not fix us and did not give us an accurate view of God. In fact, what it gave us is religion: the guilty heart of man responding to man's perception of an offended God. We can sort of function with each other, but it does not bridge the gap to God.

In fact, the Law itself has created its own distortion. We humans tend to elevate the Law above the Law giver. We make rules or add rules and think God is smiling on us when we do. We oppress others, even oppress ourselves, to attempt to mollify an angry God. The Law itself is good but is limited in its capability. It becomes quite wrong, even evil, when used inappropriately.

When God in the flesh, Jesus, walked the earth his opponents were less those who dwelled on the license side of the continuum than the legalists. The woman at the well who was a serial adulterer (John 4), or the woman caught in adultery (John 8) were not condemned by Jesus but encouraged to "sin no more." Mark 2:17 sums it up well when Jesus said: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

In contrast, those who were actively peddling legalism were soundly rebuked continually by Jesus. In Matthew 23:27-28 Jesus calls them out:

²⁷ "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the

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bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. In Matthew 23:15 Jesus blasts them by saying: ¹⁵“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. It is safe to say legalism did not work well with Jesus.

The Apostle Paul sums it up well in Colossians 2:21-23:

²¹“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” ²²These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Legalism and license are both soundly rejected as a solution to our eternal problem. In other words, religion does not fix the problem. In fact, religion exasperates the problem.

With all that said, there is a place where the legalism to license continuum plays a vital role in the redemptive process. In the next chapter we will dive a bit into that.

Thought to ponder: Although the continuum is not the ultimate answer, in what ways does the continuum preserve peace in a world where the chaos of sin reigns?

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Chapter 6 Mercy In the Curse...But

In this chapter we are going to probe a bit into the legalism to license continuum and begin to see its value and the process of moving past it. I do not believe anyone would disagree that moving towards licentiousness leads to chaos, self-destructive behavior, and genuine harm to others. That is a no-brainer. But the other side of the continuum quickly gets complicated.

The first complication is that the legal side of the continuum, if perceived correctly, was provided by God Himself. God provided the Law through Moses, and more importantly, wrote the Law on our hearts right at the point of need...when Adam & Eve fell. This is how the Apostle Paul described it in Romans 2:12-16:

¹² All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.

My point in this is that there is a God given definition of the Law on the Legal end of the continuum. There is also a lot of distortion out there. People add rules and definitions of what is right to what God has proclaimed. Whenever the dirty side of legalism rears its head, you see a lot of added and oppressive rules coming into play. Those of us who have been around Christian churches can attest to having experienced, or at least viewed, oppressive legalism at play.

But the issue becomes more dire when we consider what God provided, even if we perceive it accurately. We cannot do it...we fall short. There is nothing new there. Then Jesus comes along in the Sermon on The Mount and takes the Law and makes it an issue of the heart (Matthew 5:21-48). Now it is not just actions, but motives are in play. It does not make it easier when it ends in loving your enemy and being perfect like God (Matthew 5:48). That is the standard. To say we fall short is a massive understatement.

So, God provided something good we cannot even come close to doing. The religious continuum does not work in fixing the problem. Here is the Apostle Paul's evaluation of an earnest seeker of God attempting it from the continuum (Romans 7:14-24):

¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in

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me, that is, in my sinful nature.^[a] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my Inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

This is not the way the faith walk is supposed to operate. Stay tuned...we are about to meet the guardian!

Thought to ponder: Have you ever felt crushed by the spiritual need to do more? How did you respond to that?

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Chapter 7 The Guardian

We are in the middle of this discussion about the Legalism side of the continuum. Let us begin to unpack the role of the Law. In Galatians 3:23-24, the Apostle Paul makes an interesting statement about the Law:

²³ Before the coming of this faith,^[a] we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our **guardian** until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

Look at the action words that Paul uses:

- Held in custody.
- Locked up
- Law was our guardian (think of the role of a parole officer)

All these phrases carry the idea of being restricted and confined in what we do. The idea is if you break away from the Law, dreadful things happen as the Law enforces accountability. Remove that restraint from any of us and how do you think we would act? The Law was good and a mercy for fallen man. But it did not fix the problem...it only restrained it (sort of).

The other thing the Law did was define sin, but it also excited and activated it. Romans 7:7-13 explain it perfectly:

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”^[a] ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good.

¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

The continuum does not fix our fallen state problem, but it does expose it. Let us make this practical. Most people who come to a genuine faith have an experience that looks like a slide from the licentious end of the spectrum towards the legalistic. In other words, the life being lived was filled with guilt over the life being lived. My own experience was self-destructive,

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dangerous, chaotic, and left a trail of broken relationships. There was pain. When God moved in my heart, the immediate transformation was away from those things that were destructive as I embraced those things which were viewed as good and growing. To my friends, they saw me changing my behaviors in ways that looked “religious,” a fair and honest observation.

My segway into faith was more than a religious act, although it probably looked like one to those who witnessed it. But I can honestly say that the slide down the continuum from the licentious to the legalistic was part of the process. Reflecting on that time, the limitations were protection.

So, the continuum does not fix the problem, but it is part of the solution. We will explore that more in the following chapters.

Thought to ponder: Have you ever experienced a fervent desire to just do and be better? What did that desire lead to?

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Chapter 8 It Is Bigger Than You Think

Thus far in our study we have been centering around the *legalism to license continuum* within the context of religious beliefs. That makes sense. But what if it is much bigger? If God wrote morality into our hearts, then it should express itself in more ways than just religious beliefs. In fact, the constructs of society should resemble the constructs of religion and often operate the same way. We are going to jump into the deep end of the pool on this one.

Before we jump in, please understand that I am going to deliberately use examples that are highly controversial with opinions that are strongly held. I suspect by the end of the chapter I will have hit a nerve with everyone who reads it. Maybe that is foolish writing. Please keep this in mind...I am in no way making a statement for or against any of the examples I use. I am honestly attempting to display different and opposing thoughts in an objective and honest manner without interjecting my personal beliefs. If something seems different than that, please give me the benefit of intent. The examples themselves are not the point...what drives the examples are.

Example 1:

- There are those within our society who view the United States as a “Christian” country. They would suggest that our heritage is “Christian” and that our destiny is “Christian.” In their minds, God has a special relationship with the United States that we citizens are held accountable for. Some embrace it with a religious fervor.
- Others view the US as a melting pot where people from any culture, race, or religion are welcome to come. They believe our diversity is what gives us strength. God accepts everyone...so should we. Some embrace it with a religious fervor.
- These two belief systems are destined to collide. Both sides would claim a God given high ground (the legal side of the continuum) and view the other side as morally wrong (the license side of the continuum).

Example 2:

- There are those who believe that government has the God given responsibility of dispensing judgement for certain crimes via the death penalty. Some embrace this with religious fervor.
- There are others who believe the God who gave the command “Thou shalt not kill” did not make an exception for capital punishment. Some embrace this with religious fervor.
- Again, both belief systems are destined to collide and both sides would feel they are on God’s higher ground.

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Example 3:

- There are those who view the natural world and its inhabitants as a God given gift that we are to care for. Every species matters and the care of the planet is a primary responsibility. Some embrace it with a religious fervor.
- There are others who believe God provided resources for humankind to freely use. These resources are for the benefit of advancing society. For example, lumber is more valuable for the advancement of society than protecting the environment of the wildlife that might live in the forest. Some embrace it with a religious fervor.

Every social issue that divides people is comprised of a sense of moral superiority over the opinion of the opposing side. It is the world in a non-religious paradigm doing the religious *legalism to license continuum* with each side defining the parameters. It is not just religion that sorts life this way...it is everything in life being sorted this way. Again, I attribute the fallen minds of humans that are destined to operate within the confines of the *legalism to license continuum*. In other words, the foundation of religion sits at the core of every life value. This is an important concept to understand as we begin to decipher the differences between religion and faith. For example, religion and politics have a lot in common... yet the issue is much broader than politics. Any moral evaluation is a placement on the *legalism to license continuum* from where we judge others on issues based on where they stand on our perception of the continuum compared to us.

So now we are deeply into the deep end of the pool. Every aspect of life has a dimension to it that distinctly looks religious, even in areas where religion does not appear to be a factor. The *legalism to license continuum* reigns supreme.

Thought to ponder: Can you think of any social or political issue that is not driven by some sort of debate where each side thinks they have a moral high ground?

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Chapter 9 The Starting Gate

Before we jump any further, let us review:

- Through the actions of Adam & Eve in the garden we inherited a fallen nature.
- That nature is religious based on a continuum of legalism to license.
- God defined the legal end of the continuum through the giving of the Law through Moses, but more importantly by writing it on our hearts. That legal side of the continuum, as expressed by God, exposes the chaos and evil of the licentious side of the continuum.
- Of course, we fallen humans have a propensity to distort what God provided in the Law by adding and subtracting things that really are not relevant. Legalism itself becomes a distorted view.
- This continuum is hard wired to our fallen souls. We are thus essentially religious beings who slide up and down the continuum.
- No matter how hard we try, religion will not, in and of itself, get us to God and solve our fallen nature problem.
- But the continuum does have a valid purpose and is part of the process.

The end game of a faith walk is to be in relationship with God off the continuum. It is also the restoration of our soul and body to what God initially intended and was realized by Adam & Eve in the garden before the fall.

But we don't start completed. God in His mercy takes us where we are. All of us at the start are on the continuum. It always starts with the goodness of God as expressed in the Law exposing the dark things we do and think. We are drawn to goodness and the only response we know is to slide towards the Law. That is the Guardian at work. We tend to slough off the perceived bad things we are doing and find goodness in being free from the destruction of our licentious leaning thoughts, motivations, and behaviors.

This is a normal part of the process. The Apostle Paul writes about the younger in faith person and how we respond to them by example in 1 Corinthians 8:1-9:

8 Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. **2** Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. **3** But whoever loves God is known by God.^[a]

4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." **5** For even if there are so-called

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gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

The passage deals with eating food sacrificed to idols. I would suggest that it is an example of anything that might offend the conscience of a young believer who is still operating close to the continuum...most of us start there. Faith begins on the continuum even though the Gospel itself is moving us off and away from it. My personal initial response in faith was a self-improvement sort of mindset. I no longer had to be THAT guy. Goodness was now available to me. My future was bright...all the way to eternity. The Law had done its convicting job. Grace was now at work. Although the continuum seemed close and I viewed myself as a religious person, the grace ship was slowly moving away from the religious dock as a higher calling awaits.

Thought to ponder: How do we protect the faith of those who are new to the faith?

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Chapter 10 The Higher Calling

We have thus far explored the concept of religion right up to the point of grace. For a moment religion and faith touch, but they separate quickly into quite different entities.

Now, this begs the question: What exactly is God's purpose in providing us a faith walk with Him? What it is not is an exercise where we try to appease an offended God that we do not really understand. It also is not a roller coaster ride on the legalism to license continuum. So, let us just take religion off the table. For some that might be a tough concept to grab onto. But it is important we do.

A faith walk can be defined in two broad categories:

1. To know God as He is.
2. To be conformed back into what we were created to be in the first place.

In the garden, humankind may have gained the knowledge of good and evil. It was not a good thing. What we lost is the capacity to see God outside of that lens. Our view of God is completely distorted. As we grow in faith our understanding of who God is grows. Our natural inclination is to see God as demanding and requiring of us good deeds to hold off His hair trigger anger. We certainly grow away from that over time, but I can guarantee all of us have a lot of ground to cover to even begin to comprehend the true nature of God and His interaction with us. The Apostle Paul writes a prayer at the end of Ephesians 3 that captures the essence of this idea:

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family ^{in heaven and on earth derives its name.} ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, **to grasp** how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and **to know** this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may **be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.**

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

A faith walk is rooted in an intimate relationship with God based on who He really is. We grow in that as God systematically reveals more of Himself to us. It is only known as it is experienced, and it is God's loving will that we internalize that experience.

The second category of a faith walk is to be transformed. If you ask believers what the gospel is, a common answer is salvation from my sins so I can go to Heaven. That is a very incomplete answer. The Gospel (good news) is that God is transforming you into all you were created to be. Forgiveness is a part of the process and Heaven is certainly in our future. But the transformation is the "good news." Paul in Ephesians gives an exhortation in Ephesians 4:20-24:

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²⁰That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²²You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³**to be made new in the attitude of your minds;** ²⁴**and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**

God has called us specifically to know God as He is and to be transformed into all God created us to be. That is the focus. You and I are a new creation!

Thought to ponder: What strategies can we employ to facilitate an attitude of growth?

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Chapter 11 The New Creation

The New Testament is essentially a contrast between something old and something new. Religion as defined by the legalism to license continuum is well grounded in the old. But the call is for something new. This new thing isn't based on religion but based on relationship. It is not based on what we do, but what God did. It is not about judgement, but about reconciliation. It is not meant to divide but to bring together. At the end of the day, religion and faith stand in opposition.

Look at the Apostle Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 5:16-19:

¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the **new creation** has come:^[a] The **old has gone, the new is here!** ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The concept described throughout the New Testament as "new" is the foundation of what a faith walk is and what religion is not. It is beautiful, deep, enlightening, and edifying. It is what faith is and when explored shows the amazing love of God in action.

I will give an example that works in my thinking. People who like cars will be able to relate to this. Occasionally you hear about somebody finding an old classic car stuffed in some barn somewhere. It has been sitting there for years. It may be rusted, the tires are flat, no way will it run. To the untrained eye it is a rusted piece of junk. To the trained eye it is a rare treasure. People will pay a massive amount of money to buy a car like this so they can lovingly and meticulously restore it. It really is an incredible thing.

We are like God's barn find. We are of great value that God has spent a great amount to purchase. In love, God is restoring us to our former glory, making us into all we were intended to be. We are His new creation.

Thought to ponder: What can we learn about God by focusing on His work in re-creating us into His image?

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Chapter 12

The Demise of Religion...The End Game

Early in this study we reflected on the experience of Eden, the perfect environment created for the perfect image bearer, humankind. Religion did not exist in the Garden of Eden because it was foreign to the nature of the newly created humankind. There was but one simple rule and if that one rule was obeyed, there were no bad choices. There was fulfillment, harmony, and joy in life. God was clearly seen as He genuinely is and there was close and intimate relationship with Him. Religion did not exist.

If we go back to the original disobedience and see its implications, we see mankind's thinking is altered, his existence becomes limited and defined, his perception of God becomes dislodged from reality, paradise is removed, all of creation is knocked off kilter, and this religious paradigm we have been exploring becomes mankind's all-encompassing method of operating. Everything is either broken or highly affected by what is broken. That is the starting point for God in His redemptive process.

In the last chapter we touched on the true essence of the gospel, the transformation of humankind back to what God always intended. It is more than just the transformation of our heart and soul. Everything in creation is touched by this renewal. The best way to begin to understand what this means is to look at what has been revealed about God's end game in redemption.

Let's move ahead in time to when everything is restored. Let us get a glimpse of what paradise looks like after it is restored:

We are changed:

Earlier in our study we touched on the *higher calling* and the *new man*. Those are promises. We will see God as He is, and we will be transformed. In the eternal paradise that becomes foundational to everything. Adam in Eden walked, talked, and hung with God. So will we.

Paradise is restored:

If you close your eyes and imagine perfect paradise, as grand and glorious as that is, your imagination will fall short of the ultimate reality. In Revelation 21, we see an entire city that was crafted and built by God Himself in Heaven, being placed on the earth. The most precious gems and metals are used to describe the common materials used to build this city. When viewed from a distance, this is how it is described: *It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.* (Revelation 21:11). In other passages we see environmental perfection. We see overwhelming beauty. It is a safe place...even the predator and the prey live in perfect harmony. Even in our fallen world in our fallen state we can

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become overwhelmed with the beauty of God's creation. Imagine the beauty of paradise viewed through the lens of a restored heart! It is beyond comprehension.

Relationships with others will be unified and meaningful.

So far in this study the focus has been on the individual. The redemptive process goes well beyond that. Later in the study we will touch on this. For now, just imagine a world without strife. Imagine relationships that all have meaning. Imagine operating in a world where you have a high view of your own self-worth, but also an unclouded vision of the worth of others. Imagine a world of immense diversity but operating as unified and connected. That is part of God's end game.

Relationship with God is totally restored:

This is the most important and the biggest impact of all. We will see God as He is and will be in perfect unity within that relationship. As we grow in our faith, we get glimpses of this. The glimpses we get, as glorious as they are, are clouded glimpses of what we will experience and see in paradise. In Scripture we see God's glory show up to some in a glimpse and it is well beyond overwhelming to those who see it. In paradise we will see it and experience it, not as a glimpse, but as a normal reality. I suspect the first time you experience God in that way in eternal paradise, it will be the most momentous experience of your entire existence.

Religion is discarded. It has no use.

If you take all the things discussed above and everything else eternal paradise will present, you will find there really is no need or value for religion as we have defined it. We will see God as He is, and we will be changed. There will be no bad choices as we live in an environment of limitless opportunities. We will live by sight, not by faith.

Thought to ponder: When paradise is established, what are some things you will not miss at all about our current earthly existence?

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Chapter 13 Does It Matter?

We have done a fair amount of thinking and digging to get to this point. At the end of the day, does it really matter? Some would look at this and say, “it is semantics” or “mental gymnastics.” Let us look at the implications.

What God did in giving the Law was to create the perfect religion. If your desire is to pursue God in a religious way, then the pursuit of God’s Law is the perfect answer. Mind you, we are still firmly on the legalism to license continuum, but that continuum is perfectly defined by God Himself. Study God’s Law and its pursuit, and you have the perfect religion. But even perfect religion does not fix the problem. The perfect religion requires perfect adherence. A small failure becomes a total failure. There is no wiggle room at all. There is no good outweighing bad or some sort of sliding scale. It’s perfection. The Apostle Paul made that clear in the often-quoted verse, Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If pursuing God via religion is your pursuit, you are done before you start.

But religion is built into our fallen DNA, and our propensity is to pursue God in that way. What does it produce? If I am pursuing God religiously, it is all about me and my pursuit. If I feel that I am failing, then I am an unworthy worm. If I feel like I am doing it well, it tends to lead to being an arrogant fool. There is no win here.

Religion always requires you to compare yourself to a standard. Let us be honest, if you are comparing yourself to a standard, then you are comparing the people around you to that same standard. That is divisive. It also has the synergy to create an “us vs them” mentality. Again, it is very divisive. Religion also creates this mindset of looking for loopholes. We are looking for ways to justify our desires and failures. That is not healthy.

But faith is off the continuum. In Romans 3:27-28 we see:

27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. **28** For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Traditional religious practices are replaced by a relational faith established through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The life implications of this are off the charts. We have nothing to prove to God...that was resolved at the cross. My self-esteem is not based on what I have done for God...He has accepted me in love. That is freedom. I do not have to be something defined by a standard. God is working within me to become all God created me to be. That is proactive living. I do not have to judge anybody...that is what God does. My call is to love everyone around me, even my enemies. That is inclusive, not divisive. All the trappings of religion are countered by the proactive and accepting relationship God has created for us.

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The greatest contrast of all is how we view God. The Apostle John claims: “God is love” (John 4:8) As we grow in faith, we see God more clearly as He is, and His love becomes much more apparent. The person on the continuum will be confronted with the collision of thought between our flawed view of an angry God and the proclamation of a loving God. It often shows in a sentence that says “How can a loving God allow (or do)

So, does this entire study mean something? I would suggest it means a lot. It contrasts religion which dwells in the land of death and faith which dwells in the land of eternal life. In the next chapter we will explore the “most excellent way.”

Thought to ponder: With an understanding of the legalism to license continuum, how can we better understand and answer the honest question of “How can a loving God...?”

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Chapter 14

The Most Excellent Way

Sometimes when reading the Bible a phrase will just jump off the page. I had that experience when reading 1 Corinthians where the Apostle Paul states: And yet I will show you **the most excellent way** (1 Corinthians 12:31b NIV emphasis mine). Most excellent...think about it. There is nothing higher. Why would Paul use that phrase? What was going on in Corinth that would drive Paul to that place?

To be honest, the Corinthian church was a hot mess. They were divided over what appears to be personality cults. There was some weird sexual stuff openly going on in the church that was not being addressed. There was a group of out-of-control women in the church that Paul was so exasperated with that he put an Apostolic gag order on just to shut them up. The Corinthian church was obsessed with spiritual gifts to the point of distraction and abuse. Even their worship services were total chaos. Yes, the church in Corinth was a hot mess.

In addressing these issues Paul makes the statement about showing them **the most excellent way**. Obviously that group needed a better path (as do we). Here it is as stated in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,^[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸**Love never fails.** But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹²For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. **But the greatest of these is love.** (emphasis mine)

Of course, this is a familiar passage. But let us not allow familiarity to steal the thunder. This is **the answer...not an answer, but the answer.** Paul did not just produce this on his own accord. Paul's teachings have their foundation in the teachings of Jesus. It was Jesus who said:

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³⁷ ‘**Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘**Love your neighbor as yourself.**’^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (emphasis mine)

Herein lies the key that unlocks the door away from the *Legalism to License continuum*. Genuine faith is based on relationships driven by the Holy Spirit inspired love of God. In Galatians 5:22-23 the Apostle Paul expands out what faith in action looks like:

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

It is important not to miss that the fruit of the Spirit begins with love. All the other attributes flow from this. Also note that last phrase “*Against such things there is no law.*” Remember, law is on the continuum. Therefore, it is implied that the fruit of the Spirit is not on the continuum. At the end of the day, leaving the continuum behind is what we are striving for.

In Matthew 5-7 Jesus did a mega-teaching we call the Sermon on the Mount. It is beyond the scope of this writing to delve deeply into that sermon, but looking at the primary point that Jesus uses to encapsulate the entire sermon is helpful. In Matthew 7:12, another familiar passage, Jesus states:

So, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, **for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.** (emphasis mine)

Did you catch the similarity to Jesus greatest command to *love God and to love others*. When you see the term “the Law and the Prophets” it is referring to the entire Old Testament. This Spirit-led relational mindset is being created within us. That is the Gospel. All of Scripture is pointing us to this. This is what faith off the continuum looks like!

Thought to ponder: What are the component building blocks of love?

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Conclusion

At the heart of religion is the Law. We looked at that a bit and saw God provided it and it was good. But God provided something better. Several years ago, I led a study through the Bible Book of Hebrews. The message of the book is about a group of people who went from God's concept of faith back to their religious past. It took about two years to get through this study. At the start of each meeting during that entire study I had everyone do a "repeat after me" kind of exercise. It went like this:

- God did something good.
- Then God did something better
- To go from the better to the good is really bad.

That is the message of Hebrews, but it is also the message of faith. Religion can become the enemy of faith.

A couple of years back I was having a discussion with my young adult grandson. To be honest, he is a bit hostile towards things of faith. He referred to my "religious" activities and mindset. My comment back was: "I may be one of the least religious people you will ever meet." He was a bit taken back by that. He knows we attend church. He knows I have led various Bible studies over the years. I even gave him a copy of the weekly installment of a writing series I was doing at the time. It all looked "religious" to him.

From my faith perspective, it was not religious at all. I do not have to appease a God I really do not understand. Whatever issues I may have had, Jesus dealt with at the cross. I have had a strong desire to grow. In my early faith walk, that desire was insatiable. My upbringing and background put me in a position where I felt I was climbing out of a hole. That growth brought me some life success...call it a fringe benefit if you like...but it was life for me. Life skills were developed and helped me be more successful in my work. I have a great marriage largely because of the growth of my faith. I have solid friendships and relationships with people who do not necessarily see life and the world as I do. I see that as a good thing. I also feel great freedom to question what I believe and why I believe it. The mores of my group do not bind me. I can ask God the tough questions. I can even get angry at God. I see that as real and authentic. In all these ways faith is at work operating outside of religion.

Religion as defined by the *legal to licentious continuum* is driven by some very unsavory things. Fear may be at the top of the list. Looking for loopholes is also part of the process. When the religious folks on the continuum bind together in a group, the tendency is to find fault and judge those groups that do not line up to their group's beliefs. It also creates some weird behaviors. Sometimes they dress in funny ways. Sometimes they do or do not do things that really make no sense. God's solution just does not exist in religion.

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So, my encouragement to you who have endured this writing is:

- If your view of God is one of an anger that needs to be appeased, then pray for a clearer understanding.
- Pray to see God as He is.
- If you find yourself compelled to divide from others along religious lines, then rethink that. Yes, there is absolute truth out there. But the call from Jesus is to love EVEN YOUR ENEMIES. We are not called to judge...that is what God does.
- Grow in every aspect of your life. Be all you can be. God is in that.
- View yourself as a relational being, not a religious one. Your faith will become a bit more focused and meaningful.
- Most important: Follow with all your heart and strength "*the most excellent way*" which is also Jesus' "greatest command" ...**Love God and love others!**

Thanks for following along. I pray some new thoughts were generated and some perspectives were challenged. God is in the thinking and the pondering.

Thought to ponder: Was this a helpful study for you?

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Appendix A

Genesis 2 (NIV)

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. **3** Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Adam and Eve

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth^[a] and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, **6** but streams^[b] came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. **7** Then the LORD God formed a man^[c] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. **9** The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. **11** The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. **12** (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin^[d] and onyx are also there.) **13** The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. **[e]** **14** The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

18 The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

19 Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. **20** So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam^[f] no suitable helper was found. **21** So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs^[g] and then closed up the place with flesh. **22** Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib^[h] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

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²³ The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

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Appendix B

Genesis 3 (NIV)

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, **3** but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. **5** “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

6 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. **7** Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

11 And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

12 The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

14 So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,

“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring^[a] and hers;
he will crush^[b] your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

16 To the woman he said,

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“I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.”

²⁰ Adam^[c] named his wife Eve,^[d] because she would become the mother of all the living.

²¹ The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. ²² And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” ²³ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side^[e] of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

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Appendix C

Original Sin and Total Depravity

From a theological standpoint the concept we are dealing with at the root of The Birth of Religion is referred to as *the fall*. It encompasses the theological concept of *original sin*. When God's first created people, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey the one and only rule (Genesis 2:17) of the newly created paradise (Eden) there were consequences. That disobedience was the *original sin*, and the consequences of that sin was *the fall*. There is really no debate that the Bible teaches original sin and the fall. There may be debate over whether the Genesis account is literal or allegorical, but the concept of *original sin* and *the fall* is clearly taught.

Where I personally believe things become a bit more speculative than most theologians would lead on is what exactly happened at *the fall* and what that impact was on those of us who are descendants within fallen humanity. For many theologians, this is a hot button issue. This Birth of Religion writing is centered around the concepts of *the fall*. But the view of *the fall* presented in this writing is being reflected in a unique way.

In simple terms, *the fall* has been historically comprised of these elements:

1. The relationship between God and humankind was broken in Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit.
2. Humankind became infested with sin.
3. That infestation of sin created a condition some theologians call *Total Depravity*.
 - There is nothing man can do to curry God's favor.
 - There is nothing man does that is not self-centered and an abomination to God.
4. God is a holy and righteous judge and must therefore punish all sin.
5. God's holiness cannot allow sin in His presence. God and sinful man cannot be in the same room.
6. God's redemptive process of coming in the flesh in the person of Jesus and standing in our place of judgement is the only way God can accept us and allow us in His presence.

That is an oversimplification of the concept, but from 30,000 feet, this covers it. I personally have a bit of a different view of what happened at the fall. Before I jump into this, it is beyond foolish for anyone to totally surmise what totally happened at the fall. My reflections begin with the recognition that I am ankle deep in an ocean of thought. With that said, addressing the bullet points above, here goes:

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1. Obviously, the relationship between God and man was affected. Adam and Eve, after breaking of the one rule, acted completely different when God arrived in the garden. But GOD SHOWED UP! It was Adam and Eve who were hiding, not God.
2. Something obviously changed, and it was certainly pervasive and insidious. The history of humankind is the diary of what that meant.
3. I have always been uneasy with the concept of *Total Depravity*...it is complicated. Certainly, humankind is broken and has demonstrated a capacity for all kinds of unimaginable evil. Yet humankind was created in the image of God and that sometimes shows through as well. For there to be a totally restored relationship with God requires a total restoration of us. Yet there is still a goodness in us that allows us to do good things and appreciate good things when they happen around us. That does not fix the problem, but it does give us a place where hope can grow from.

The concept of Total Depravity only deals with the licentious side of the *Legalism to License* continuum. It tends to define all our fallen human existence as evil or licentious. It does not really acknowledge the legalistic side. If anything, it tends to push faith towards legalism. It also had an effect on me in my early faith walk of perceiving everything flowing from my humanity as evil. That became a crisis of faith as I had an overwhelming hunger to grow as a person.

The classic definition of Total Depravity also creates a distortion of the Biblical concept of “worldly.” 1 John 2:16 defines worldly as “lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and boastful pride of life.” That is also a great definition of the attitudes that drive licentiousness. In contrast Colossians 2:20-24 refers to the “world’s” rules as “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” which is a great definition of what drives legalism. In other words, worldly is life on the continuum, something we are called to grow beyond. There is a propensity in Christian circles for us to define someone’s actions that are more liberal than our own as “worldly.” Applying our legalisms are Biblically just as “worldly.”

4. God judges, the Bible is truly clear about that. Total Depravity would imply that our condition triggers God’s holiness. But is holiness God’s first and primary response? It is a tricky question. God’s essence in the Bible is defined as love (1 John 4:8). Is it conceivable that judgement can be guided by love? If so, what does that look like? I suspect many (if not most) people when imagining being judged by God would view God as holy, powerful, and a bit angry. I have recently been contemplating that God’s demeaner in judgement will be peaceful while radiating the glory of His goodness. The judgement would come from the obvious contrast of our brokenness to His goodness.

5, The concept that God cannot be in the presence of sin is a huge theological issue. It is a theological hill many theologians would fight and die on. Yet in Scripture, God is relating to, in the presence of, and interacting with sinful people. In the Genesis narrative that this writing is based on, God showed up. The incarnation of Jesus is the best example. God in the flesh was

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hanging with his guys, moving among the crowds, and living out life like the rest of us. There is no doubt a separation between God and man. But the problem is not God cannot be with us but that we cannot handle being with God. We need to be fixed...that is the essence of the Gospel.

6. The redemptive process at the cross meets all our spiritual needs, even needs we do not recognize we have. We have a propensity to view the cross primarily as the place of forgiveness (which it is). But it is infinitely more all-encompassing than just forgiveness. In Scripture regarding the cross, we have been given a sliver of light that leads into total and infinite glory. Again, the Gospel fixes our every need, even those we do not know we have.