



here

you are **here** in God's plan

by Tara Mulder

Jesus is here ... in our hearts; in His Word; in church.
He is the personal Savior here for the world ... He's here for you.

introduction

Christianity is not easy to understand or follow. It's a miracle anyone believes in Jesus as Savior. Literally.

This short book was written by someone who has experienced that miracle, someone who trusts in Jesus as Savior. Its contents may encourage you, unsettle you, even make you angry. Good. The question of the truth of Jesus Christ is the most important one of your life. Don't postpone the conversation—wrestle with it today.

Being a Christian is just something you progress in.

You just keep progressing. You learn. You go to Bible studies. You pray. And it's not easy, because there's so many things in the world that pull you away. But I think it's an ongoing thing.
- Alice Cooper (rock musician)

here for the world: Jesus (the 30-second version)

It's often been said that if you know what you're talking about you can make your point in 30 seconds or less. Warning: This gets personal. Here goes ...

No matter what potential for good you see in yourself and in the world—you are irrevocably messed up. No matter how hard you try you are destined to fail on your own, and just trying is not good enough. The God who made you and loves you demands perfection. When Adam and Eve messed up in the garden, bringing evil into the world, they earned the death sentence for you, for all of us.

But God loved you so much He immediately put into place a promise to substitute His own Son Jesus, who was perfect. That promise was fulfilled 2,000 years ago when Jesus died on the cross in Jerusalem and was raised from the dead on the third day. You and all who believe in Jesus will be forgiven their sins and live with Him for eternity.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...
- Romans 5:12

here for the world: Jesus (the longer version)

What's unique about the Christian faith? Jesus is here for *you*, as opposed to you being there for a god. It's that simple. It's not about your actions upward to a god, earning favor or achieving enlightenment. It's about Jesus' action downward, giving His own life for yours so that you could receive a peace for today's ups and downs and, more importantly, life in heaven forever.

Sound too good to be true? Let's take a look at the "whys" and "hows" of God to piece this all together.

Okay ... Creation.

You, me and everything seen and unseen in existence were created by and are being taken care of by one all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful being. His Name is Yahweh. Yes, I said "His" but the real deal is this ... God is so far beyond our human concept of gender that He in fact encompasses the best qualities of both, but chose to relate to us personally as Father ... but back to creation.

The first people He made, Adam and Eve, were loved by Him and given free will to love and obey Him or to rebel. He didn't force anything on them or make them mindless robots. Satan, or Lucifer, the angel who rebelled against God and was condemned to hell, was (and still is) out to take as many people down with him as he could. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God's instructions. They chose to rebel. The punishment was separation from the Father and, ultimately, death. Horrible, I know, but keep reading.

Yahweh loved Adam and Eve and all their future children (that's us!) so much that He immediately put into motion a plan to make everybody right with Him again. To be fair to His Word, God couldn't just erase the punishment for rebellion; it's not in His nature. But love is, so He sent His own Son to take our punishment and then gave us the eternal life He always had planned for us. He made a promise to save His people and He kept it.

Love is why He did it, now here's how:

God's Son, totally God and totally human at the same time, was born as a Jewish baby named Jesus a little over 2,000 years ago. His mother was a virgin named Mary (hey, He's the Almighty, so virgin birth was no biggie). He had a stepdad named Joseph but He was truly God's Son. Jesus grew into a man and was perfect—he was tempted to sin, to rebel against the way God wanted Him to live, but He never did.

At the age of 30 He chose disciples, a common Jewish practice, and taught them about God's promises found in the Scriptures and about Himself as the Messiah sent from God the Father. They helped Him teach and heal people as they traveled around sharing God's love. A lot of people thought that Jesus was actually rebelling against God. They didn't understand that He **WAS** God, so they crucified Him, the Roman capital punishment of nailing someone to a cross.

If Jesus was only human, this would be the end of the story, right? But remember, Jesus was totally God at the same time.

Yes, He died on the cross. They made extra sure of this by stabbing Him in the side. See, if He was still alive, blood alone would have come out. But He was already dead so water came out too. That's just medical science. So they took Him off the cross and buried Him in a tomb. Then they sealed the tomb tight and put Roman guards outside to keep people from stealing the body. Jesus had said that He would rise from the dead after three days, so even though His executioners didn't really believe Him, they wanted to make sure nobody had a chance to make

it look as if He had. (Even His disciples, whom he told all the answers to, didn't really understand, so He gets it when we struggle with this one too.)

As He promised he would, Jesus rose from death on the third day. The first thing He did was go down into hell to proclaim His victory over the devil and all his fallen angels. On the cross Jesus had won the war against sin and death, although Satan keeps staging battles with us to confuse and seduce people away from Jesus. Satan is a petty loser who doesn't know when to give up but that doesn't mean that Jesus didn't win the war against death, once for all. There's nothing Satan can take away from us, and there's nothing more that Jesus needs to give to make God's promise stick.

After this, Jesus appeared to His followers on earth for a period of 40 days, appearing to His disciples and charging them to spread His story and His love to all people everywhere. On the 40th day He rose up through the clouds and entered heaven. Passing through the angels, He sat down at the right hand of God His Father, with power and authority over everything in all of God's creation. But knowing that life is rough down here, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, the third part of God (the Trinity), totally one with the Father and the Son, to work faith in people's hearts and transformation in their lives.

Jesus was there for you on the cross so that you don't have to die, but through belief in Him, you have a past that is forgiven, a present lived in love, and eternal life guaranteed.

He is here for you in the community of people who follow Him, and He is here for you forever.

**I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians.
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.
- Mohandas Gandhi**

yeah, but ...

Okay, perhaps you, like Gandhi, or the Doobie Brothers, think "Jesus is just all right," but the organized church and people who claim to follow Him are a bunch of hypocrites—at best. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition. Horrible things have been done in the Name of Jesus, people acting on false understandings, people using the power of the church for personal gain. Then there's sham charity, the neighbor who sings in church on Sunday and beats his wife during the week. People who claim to be Christian have done horrible things.

First, people who hurt and manipulate are not of God, no matter what they claim. Pawns of Satan at best (sorry for the fire-and-brimstone talk, but it's true), pawns used to confuse and discredit the church of Jesus. Satan is a great lawyer, casting doubt by any means necessary. Not to let any of the creeps of history off the hook, but the real battle is spiritual. And the creeps probably aren't going away anytime soon. Only God knows the heart, but when you take the time to learn about the true nature of Jesus, the relationship we have with Him, it can help you discern things that are truly of God.

Second, being a follower of Christ doesn't mean you're good all the time and make all the right choices. People who say they are better people because they go to church are flat out wrong. Ideally, the goal of the Christian is to imitate Christ more and more as we mature in the faith, but humans are fallible. The church likewise is an organization made of humans, and even though we are supposed to be about the purposes of God, we mess up. But because of Jesus we can each admit when we mess up, say we are sorry, and we are forgiven. God promises to not even remember our sins. He loves us no matter what.

And then, beyond the creeps and mess-ups, there is the mixing of religion and politics in our times. Everyone's politics are influenced by their personal beliefs, spiritual and otherwise, but the danger is making religion about behavior and not about a relationship with a personal God.

Tom Morello of the band "Rage Against the Machine" says it well: "Religion is so tied up with political manipulation that it is hard to see if there could be a nugget of spirituality in there that can influence your life." This is another reason to strip Christianity down to its essence, to strip away the baggage humans have created in recent millennia, to strip away the baggage your crazy uncle Cecil created in recent decades.

It's about Jesus Christ. Get to know Him personally.

**For God so loved the world that He gave
His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him
shall not perish but have eternal life.
- John 3:16**

here in my heart: Terrence

It's not every Sunday that a father and son are baptized together, but that's exactly what happened recently in a Florida church. Terrence (not his real name) and his infant son were baptized together. (For a definition of baptism, see page 8).

A middle-school science teacher in his early 30s, Terrence grew up in a family where the Christian faith was taught and valued. Although he was not baptized and the family didn't go to church, Terrence prayed and read his children's Bible. He attended kindergarten at a Christian school, a year that had a deep and lasting influence, before the family moved and he attended public school.

Terrence is an example of a growing number of people in the U.S. whose faith in Jesus is part of their core identity and yet they have no denominational affiliation and are not part of a local church family. But then Terrence met and married Mia, a strong Christian from a strongly Christian family. The family was involved in a Lutheran Christian church, the same denomination as the school where he attended kindergarten. That's when spiritual matters started to come together, when faith gained definition for Terrence.

Mia's family and the familiarity of the Lutheran church made Terrence feel comfortable, and the couple began attending a church in their area. Attending church was eye opening. "Everything made sense to me," said Terrence, "and was reinforced in the Lutheran family of faith. There was never a moment in church when everything didn't make sense." The sense of community, of genuine welcome and care at this congregation was a big factor. "Every person at this church welcomes me with the same open arms that God does."

During adult instruction Terrence expressed readiness to be baptized. Plans had already been made for their son to be baptized, and so the blessed events were combined. Terrence received the sacrament first, complete with his own sponsor, and then brought his son forward for Baptism with Mia. "It was an amazing bonding experience," Terrence said with deep emotion, "to know even though my son was unaware of what was going on it was the same miracle."

How is life different for Terrence now? He's thankful for a better understanding of God's unconditional love, humbled knowing he has a place in God's life, and trusts that no matter what happens he can turn to God. More strongly defined beliefs translate into guidance and purpose for life, and Terrence is more confident in defending the faith. In a recent conversation with a fellow science teacher who doesn't share the same worldview, Terrence

found himself defending God's work. "I'm willing to stand up for everything I've learned," Terrence asserts, "where I probably wouldn't have done so before."

Even though Terrence hadn't been involved in church, Jesus was there in his heart. Being part of a faith community now gives a chance for that relationship with Jesus to grow, to give and receive spiritual support and to make a difference in the Name of Jesus. Terrence has encouraging words for people struggling with faith. "It's the Holy Spirit that does the work, and it can work for others the same way it did with me."

For it is by grace you have been saved,
through faith—and this not from yourselves,
it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.
- Ephesians 2:8-9

neither here nor there: Kate

Kate (not her real name) is a friend who taught me a lot about what it's like NOT to believe in Jesus. Her parents didn't go to church, but in her early teen years she went to youth events at a local church with friends. She says she "got saved or whatever," giving her life to Jesus, but it wasn't long before she pushed it all aside.

She is deeply spiritual, sends up prayers into the universe, and strives to keep the energy positive she puts forth into the world. She's kind and fun and a good friend. An anthropologist, she views the world as a beautiful multi-cultural tapestry. She once told me she's offended when she sees pictures of a "white Jesus on a cross" when the world is full of so many shades of people. Listening to her, I'm reminded how much cultural baggage has been added to Christianity through the ages, how far we've come from an uncluttered understanding of Jesus.

It could be said that Christianity started as an Eastern religion, but has been affected by Western thought and society. Despite tension sometimes and polite disagreement, Kate's questions and objections to Jesus have been blessings to me. She thinks of things I wouldn't because I'm so close to it. Her view from the *outside in* makes me stop and think, search for answers, and actually strengthens my faith.

But back to Kate's heart. We listen to each other, respect each other, and share our beliefs. One time she shared with me, "Maybe you're right. Maybe Jesus is the only way. It's just not for me right now."

This shocked me. Questions and objections I could handle; controversy I could handle; but just not finding Jesus relevant? I think I said something lame like "He's always there when you're ready."

I don't know what the future holds for her faith life. That's between Kate and God; I'll keep listening.

[Christ] has saved us and called us to a holy life—
not because of anything we have done but because
of His own purpose and grace.

This grace was given us in Christ Jesus
before the beginning of time ...
- 2 Timothy 1:9

here in my heart: Tara

There's a lot I've learned about the Bible and theology. My faith though, my personal relationship with Jesus, is deep and personal. This is not something I achieved on my own in any way, but a gift that has transformed me from the inside out. Here in my heart Jesus is the Almighty who laid down His life for the whole world, and He's also the Almighty who's intimately connected with every part of my life.

The best example to me of this intimacy is the morning He made breakfast for His disciples. Breakfast! One of the apostles, John, describes this in his book of the Bible. It was a morning some time after Jesus was crucified on the cross and rose from the dead. He hung out for a while on earth before returning to heaven. It was a time of uncertainty for the disciples, and they returned to their familiar work of fishing. No success. They were out all night without catching anything. I picture a scene of moody silences and short tempers.

At dawn, someone calls out to them from the shore in the early morning to let down their nets on the other side of the boat. The net fills to bursting, and the disciples realize it is Jesus on the shore. A demonstration of Jesus' divine power, this miracle reminded the disciples that He was true God.

When they got to shore, they saw bread and fish cooked over burning coals. Jesus said, "Come and have breakfast." Can you imagine it? The Almighty, the Redeemer of all people who just endured cross and grave, is making you breakfast! A demonstration of Christ's intimate love, this breakfast reminds the disciples that He is alive, and He's still their servant, still their friend.

I don't pretend to understand everything about the Bible and theology, but this snapshot of Jesus gives a clearer picture of Him and my relationship to Him. He's here in my heart. He loves the people of the world so much that He laid down His life so that we could receive eternal life; He lives all powerful, and to paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning: He loves us to the level of every day's most quiet need.

I pray that out of His glorious riches [God] may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.
- Ephesians 3:16-19

(from a letter written by the apostle Paul to a first-century group of believers)

so what's that?: glossary

Jesus: Greek name with the same meaning as the Hebrew name Joshua—"God is salvation."

Christ: Not Jesus' last name, but a Greek word meaning "anointed." It is the same as the Hebrew "messiah."

Trinity: The term referring to the three-Person nature of God, consisting of the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They are perfectly one, together without beginning or without end.

Free Will: Big issue. And kind of hard to figure out. Just because God is all powerful, it doesn't mean that we are like chess pieces on a chess board. He created us as rational beings and, therefore, we have the freedom to make our own choices in matters of daily life. While believing in Jesus is not achieved through reason or will, how we respond and the choices we make in our earthly life are ours.

Ten Commandments/the Law: God does have expectations for the way we should live. Trusting that the commandments are for our benefit (and they are) makes us want to follow them, although there is no way we can follow them perfectly. Jesus, during His time on earth, followed the commandments perfectly in our place.

Sin: Anytime we do what we want to do even though it's not what God would have us do, that's a sin. To be tempted to sin is not the same as sinning. Jesus was tempted to sin just as we are, but never committed a sin. Note: Being a Christian doesn't mean you stop sinning, no matter how hard you try. But when we ask the Lord to forgive us, He remembers our sin no more.

Grace: The word often used for the unconditional love and forgiveness we receive from Jesus, who, while we were still sinners, gave His life for ours so that through faith we are reconciled with Him. There is nothing we can do to earn it; it is a gift. Sometimes it is even called a stumbling block, as many people are more comfortable with trying to earn their own salvation.

Christian: First used as an insult, the term Christian refers to people who believe Jesus died and rose to save them from their sins.

Disciple of Christ: Fully devoted follower of Christ, actively learning more about Him and living a Christ-like life.

Bible/Holy Scriptures: Also referred to as God's Word or the Word. God-inspired and humanly expressed, the Bible is often considered a letter from God to all people—it's all about God's plan of salvation. It records His relationship with the people of Israel; it records His promises and how He fulfilled them in actual human history (the Old Testament or Tanakh in Hebrew), and then the New Testament records Jesus' coming to earth as a baby, His teaching and healing, his death and resurrection.

It also holds letters written by leaders in the faith to the newly formed churches of the first century. It's R-rated, not always easy to understand, and has been hotly debated for centuries. It is best understood through Jesus Himself, looking back through the cross to the promises of the Old Testament and looking forward through the cross to renewal and new life in Christ in the New Testament. For tips on reading the Bible, see page 9.

Faith: The Greek word "pistis," most often translated as faith, means "firm persuasion" and "a conviction based upon hearing." It is not based on logic or reasoning, but rather is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Once received, it is attitude, conviction and conduct based on a right relationship with God. It is not static, but grows in strength and depth as we nourish that relationship with our Savior throughout our lives.

Sacraments: Holy acts instituted by God and practiced by Christians, involving an earthly element and God's Word. They are mysterious, miraculous and considered the "means of grace," or bringing about the forgiveness of sins. Sacraments include Baptism and Communion.

Baptism: A holy act involving water and God's Word. Water is applied in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, miraculously creating faith in the heart.

Communion: Also called the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper. A holy act involving unleavened bread and wine in which Christ's body and blood are mysteriously present at the same time with the bread and wine. Originating from the Jewish Passover meal, the Lord's Supper is celebrated often in Christian churches as a way of receiving the forgiveness of sins.

Prayer: Prayer is talking to God. Because of Jesus we can approach the Almighty with confidence. There is awe and there is intimacy. He listens, He cares, and He provides what is best for us. A simple way to pray in our own words is to start with praise or acknowledging God's attributes, then confess what we have done wrong, then thank Him for what He has done, and then ask Him for what we need according to His will. You'll get one of three answers—yes, no, or wait.

Creed: Statement of faith. There are three creeds historically used in the Christian church as declarations of the true nature of God, salvation in Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit given to believers. They are the Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. Each is "confessed" or spoken aloud in church to proclaim the Christian faith and they are used to teach the basic tenets of Christianity.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.
- 2 Corinthians 5:17

here in this place: church

Organized religion and formal worship can be a beautiful and practical thing. Church, to many, means regular meetings to celebrate how God comes to us in His Word and in His Sacraments (see glossary) and how we bend our hearts toward Him by praying, singing and organizing for service to the community and the world. Some of the greatest music ever written was inspired (Bach, Handel, Mozart, etc.) by faith in Jesus and to glorify Him in worship.

No one has to go to church to be saved. The Bible does encourage us to meet together, and Jesus set the example Himself by going to synagogue during his time on earth. Those who do go to church can find strength and support from fellow believers (really nice when half the world calls you a fool for having faith). It's a group of imperfect people, so it's not a perfect place, but it's a place to learn and grow in understanding; to draw closer to God Himself because He's there. His presence is in the places we call "church" in a powerful way.

He's in the heart surely, wherever we go, but to gather with other believers, whether it's in a cathedral, a garage, or around a supper table, is a huge part of the joy and strength of life in Christ.

Jesus said, "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away."
- John 6:37

here in His Word: the Bible

Okay, so throughout this book, you've seen quotations with odd names and numbers. The Bible is organized into books, chapters and verses. So John 6:37 refers the reader to the book of John, the 6th chapter, the 37th verse.

The 66 books of the Bible were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by over 40 different authors, representing all walks of life. God used shepherds, farmers, tent-makers, physicians, fishermen, priests, philosophers and kings. Despite these differences in occupation and the span of years it took to write it (more than 1,500 years), the Bible is an extremely cohesive and unified book. It's all about God's plan of salvation for all people. It has been translated into more than 2,000 languages, making it the best-selling book of all time.

It is best understood through Jesus Himself, looking back through the cross to the promises of the Old Testament and looking forward through the cross to renewal and new life in Christ in the New Testament.

In the front of every Bible there is a list of books by page numbers. You can read the Bible cover to cover, or dive in to certain sections. Here are some verses relevant to certain topics you may want to explore, seeing what God has to say:

Jesus: Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Isaiah 53:4-12; John 3:16; Romans 5:6-11

Anger: Proverbs 15:18; Romans 12:19; James 1:19-20

Compassion: Psalm 145:8, Micah 7:19, 1 Peter 3:8

Doubt/Encouragement: Deuteronomy 3:28; Psalm 31:24; Psalm 42:5; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Friendship: Proverbs 17:17; Proverbs 27:17; Luke 11:5-10; John 15:13-15

Loneliness: Psalm 23:4

Stress: Psalm 55:22; Psalm 118:5-9; 2 Corinthians 4:8-11

Suffering: John 6:33; Romans 5:6-8

More: visit www.biblegateway.com

Be of good courage and He will strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the Lord.
- Psalm 31:24 (NKJV)

here & now: a prayer for you

So how are you doing with the all-important question of Jesus? Angry, happy, full of questions? Talk to someone.

You can even talk to the Lord Himself. Use your own words. Nothing fancy required. He's listening. Below is a common prayer used when a person wants to acknowledge the start of a relationship with Jesus as Savior. Try it or one like it in your own words.

My Father in heaven, I realize I am a sinner and fall far short of what You want for my life. I cannot of my own power save myself or earn eternal life with You in heaven. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to die for me and by the power of His resurrection, You have made me alive. Help me to turn from my sins and follow You. But even when I fall into sin, You have forgiven me through Your gift of faith in Jesus. I am grateful for Your gift of eternal life. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.
- Hebrews 13:8

Messed up yet forgiven and made new in Jesus Christ, Tara is an artist, writer, and educator. She loves big laughs, short prayers, making art for sacred spaces, and learning more about God every day. She enjoys being involved in her neighborhood church, which she may or may not skip occasionally (but only for research into popular culture).

*Big thanks to her sister Audra, a missionary, for her bold editing of this book.
"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).*



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