

# In the Beginning

I want to tell you about a friend of mine named **James**.<sup>1</sup> James was born into a conservative family in South Carolina. His dad, James Sr., worked for a civil engineering firm and was in charge of large road projects across the state. James Sr. was what many people would call a “man’s man.” Went to the Citadel, calluses on his hands, chewed tobacco day-in and day-out, and spent his weekends watching college football on TV. One day, when James Jr. was four, while an Oregon Ducks game was on TV, he saw their jerseys and casually mentioned to his dad that his favorite color was yellow. James Sr. muted the TV and quickly shot back to James Jr., “No it’s not. Don’t be silly—boys don’t like *yellow*.”

Eventually, James Sr. began to notice that when they watched football together, his son was generally **more interested in the band** performing at halftime than he was in the football game *itself*. When James Jr. was in middle school, James asked his dad if he could join the band at his school. His dad told him that before he could join the band, he had to play two seasons of *football* to see if he liked it. So after two years of playing football (and mostly hating it), James Jr. asked his dad again: “can I play in the band *now*?” James Sr. took his son out for a burger that night and said “listen—men play football, they don’t play in the band. If you want to be a man, you need to learn how to do manly things.”

**Much of James Jr.’s childhood** was him being encouraged to do things his dad considered “manly,” James feeling completely out of place doing those things, and both of them feeling more alienated from each other as a result. During high school, a rift started to open up between father and son. James Jr. felt like, nearly all of the time, he had to make a choice: he could either pursue things he was interested in, *or* he could earn the affection and attention of his dad. He couldn’t have both. So they grew further and further apart. To this day, when James Jr. hangs out with his dad (which is rare), he can’t fight the feeling that he has been a colossal disappointment to him. He now struggles with crippling depression, and the older he gets and the more therapy he does...the more he’s convinced that the root of a lot of it is the relationship (or lack thereof) with his dad.

I want to tell you *another* story about a *woman* named **Keira**. Keira grew up in a city outside London. She says for much of her childhood, people would use the term “tomboy” to describe her. And by that, they mostly just meant she liked sports and wearing t-shirts over playing with dolls and wearing dresses. Going through puberty was

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<sup>1</sup> Names and minor identifying details of this story have been modified.

difficult and awkward for Keira, like it is for a lot of girls; she felt uncomfortable with the changes happening to her body. And eventually, she started experiencing an attraction to other girls. All of this made her feel very out of place within herself.

Before long, Keira says **her parents started asking her** if she “wanted to be a boy.” Up until then, she had never considered that as an *option*, but started to research it online. She began seeing a psychiatrist, who soon referred her to something called the *Gender Identity Development Service*. This organization very quickly diagnosed Keira with *gender dysphoria*. They approved chemical and eventually surgical transition for her. She was put on puberty blockers at age 16, began receiving testosterone at age 17, and when she was 20, had a double mastectomy to remove her breasts. She began living her life as a man.

**But just a couple years into** all of this, Keira said she started feeling more out of place than ever within her new body. She didn’t feel *better* about being a man; she felt *worse*. So she eventually began the process of *detransitioning* back to female—but some of that wasn’t *possible* for her anymore. Her voice had been forever altered, she had likely become permanently infertile, and her reproductive organs had atrophied due to the meds she was taking—none of which could be undone. In 2020, Keira filed a **lawsuit** against the clinic that oversaw her transition. Her legal team actually *won* the case, with the court determining that children being treated at the clinic were being subjected to “what amounted to *experimental* treatment with *life-altering* outcomes.”<sup>2</sup> Keira was one of those children. //

James Jr. and Keira are **two people’s lives** who were *substantially impacted* by what they were taught and told about gender. And they’re not *alone*: if you pay attention, stories like theirs are *everywhere*. *Countless* people whose lives and futures are caught in the crosshairs of the gender debate.

Today we **begin a new series** called *Intentional: God’s Design for our Gender*. **Over the next seven weeks, we’ll take a deep dive into what the Scriptures have to say about our gender, our identity, and how we think about those things well as followers of Jesus.** We’ll be dissecting a lot of *ideas*—sacred and secular—related to those topics. But I **begin with those two stories because as we do all that, I don’t want us to lose sight of something very important. And that’s that amidst all the thinking and talking and debating about gender ideology, at the core of it all are people.** Human beings. *Real people* whose *real lives* are being impacted by the opinions we hold about all of this. Impacted sometimes for the better and sometimes for the

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<sup>2</sup> You can read Keira’s first-person story in full [here](#).

worse. **The things we believe, say, and teach about gender can alter people's futures *substantially*, and sometimes, *permanently*.**

Which means it's **very important that we discuss** these topics **well**. It's important that we don't just say what's *popular* or what *feels* right. It's important that we don't just parrot what our political party thinks or what our group of friends post online. It's important that we get this *right*. If for no *other* reason, than because people's *lives* and *well-being* hang in the balance. So **in this series, we're going to speak philosophically, and ideologically, and scientifically—and as always, *biblically*. But through it all, we're also going to speak *personally* and *pastorally*.**

At the end of the day, **I have very little interest** in just adding to the *debate* around these issues. I'm not a gender studies professor. I'm not a philosopher. I'm not a social scientist. I'm not a psychologist. I'm a *pastor*. Which means I am primarily interested in *helping* and *caring for people*. And specifically, I'm interested in helping people know and follow *Jesus well*. And whether we are *comfortable* with it or *not*, **our understanding of gender matters** in that conversation. As we just saw in those two stories. It's *important*. Now it's not of *ultimate* importance—it's not *more important* than everything *else*. It's not more important than the *gospel*. But it's also not of *zero* importance. We can't just dismiss it and dodge it—any more than we can dodge what the bible teaches about money or sex or justice or forgiveness. **If we care about people, and care about God, we should also care what God says about gender.**

So **over the next couple months**, we're going to talk about what it means that God created both men *and* women **in his image**. We're going to talk about what **masculinity is**, and what it *isn't*. We're going to talk about what **femininity is**, and what it *isn't*. We're going to talk about what it looks like for men and women to have healthy, platonic **friendships** with one another. We're going to talk about what it looks like for men and women to be partners in **marriage**. And finally, we're going to discuss how to approach the transgender conversation as followers of Jesus. We're **covering a lot of ground** in this series.

**But today**, believe it or not, I **don't want to talk** about hardly *any* of that. **Today, I simply want to talk about God**. And here's why I think we have to start there. Let's just *assume*, for the sake of discussion, that God does indeed have things to say about our gender, and how we understand and live out our gender. Assuming that's *true*, that leaves all of us with the question: **why should we listen to God?** Right? We're left asking *can that God be trusted—with anything—but specifically*, with what he has to say about my gender? That is really the question underneath all the others, whether we're

talking about gender, or anything else. So that feels like an important question to start off this series with.

So to answer that question, this morning, I want to **offer what I think** are three really good reasons to trust God on all this—and ultimately to trust him in every arena of our lives. There are way *more* than three, to be sure. But I think there are at least three *big categories*. And my hope is that these give us a foundation to build on for the rest of this series, as we talk about an area that, for many, is difficult to trust God *in*. So, the **first reason** I think God can be trusted is this:

## He created us.

God can be trusted because **he is our creator**. Take a look with me at the first sentence in the entire bible, **Genesis 1:1**:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

“In the beginning.” **Before there was you or I or anything else, there was God. And that God chose to create.** This verse says he created **“the heavens and the earth.”** Most scholars agree that that phrase is actually an ancient Hebrew expression that means essentially, “everything.” It’s an expression like “from top to bottom,” or “from head to toe.” **What the author of Genesis means is that everything you and I see and know in the world around us was created, by God, in the beginning.**

And **then, as the crown jewel** of his creation, it says God created *us*. He *created* human beings. Now, I’m aware that different followers of Jesus interpret parts of Genesis 1-2 differently from one another. They disagree on *how* God created the world and exactly *when* God created the world and how many actual days he took to do it. But do you know what pretty much *all* of them agree on? ***That*** God created the world. And that what he created includes us: *human beings*.

**We’re also** told that God created humanity with a *purpose*: that purpose is peppered all over the pages of Genesis 1 & 2. God had an *intention* in making us, which is where we got the name for this series. Our God is an *intentional* God, and he has *intention* and *purpose* behind everything he does—including *creating* you and I. Now, here’s why that matters for our series: **if God created us with an *intention*, it seems like he would be the one to ask about how we live into and out of that intention.** Does that make sense? **He’s the creator, which means he has the answers we need.**

**If God *didn't* create us**—or more broadly, **if we weren't created** with any intention at all—then there's no *need* to listen to *him* about how to live. And for *that* matter, we don't really need to listen to *anybody* about how to live...except for ourselves. If you and I are, as some have suggested, just *animals* with time and chance on our side, we can actually *live* however we want. *Do* whatever we want. *Say* whatever we want. *Become* *whoever* we want. Which, to many people, sounds like a really compelling way to approach life. If we're all here by accident, then no one else can tell us what to do.

But **there's also a *problem*** with that view. A pretty *massive* one, in fact. One that several prominent atheists have pointed out before.<sup>3</sup> Here's the problem: if you and I can live however *we want* to live, that means we can't tell anyone *else* how *they should* live. What *they* can or can't *do*. What *they* can or can't *say*. What *they* can or can't *become*. Even when *their* actions negatively impact *us*. **You see if there is no *design*, no *purpose*, no *intention*...then there actually is no such thing as *ethics*.** Because remember: everyone gets to chart *their own* course. Everyone gets to create *their own* purpose. So **in this view, you can say that you don't *personally like* someone else's actions—but you can't ever say that their actions are *wrong*.** ~~Put simply, if you hold this view, you forfeit the ability to ever use the word "should." You can't say that anyone *should* or *shouldn't* do anything—only that you would personally *prefer* that they do or not do what they're doing.~~

Now, here's **why that's particularly a *problem* when** we start **talking about *gender*** and *identity*. Most of the discussions happening in our world about gender right now are actually conversations *about ethics*: *how should we* define the words "man" and "woman"? *What should or shouldn't* a trans\* person be able to do about their situation when their experience doesn't match their biological make-up? What counsel *should* a mental health professional give or *not* give to a person experiencing gender dysphoria? *What medications or surgeries should we (or shouldn't we)* recommend for those people? *What pronouns should or shouldn't we* use for people? It's pretty much all a conversation about *ethics*. But without a *purpose*, there's no way to *agree* on *ethics*. So all we're left to do is yell our personal preferences at each other, louder and more aggressively. And then insist that other people are crazy or evil—or both—for not agreeing with our perspective. And that is how we got into the mess we're currently in.

Now, **maybe you personally would add a *qualifier*** to the ethic we laid out earlier. Maybe you would say "well I believe that people *should* be able to do whatever they want...*as long as their actions don't hurt anybody else*." And I would say that sounds like a *great* ethic to live by. I might even be inclined to join you in *living* by that ethic. But the problem

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<sup>3</sup> Two that have talked at-length on this are Nietzsche and Sartre.

is *still* that if someone were to ask “well *why* is *that* the right standard to live by?” You and I would still only be able to say “because it feels right.” Which, at the end of the day, is not the most solid basis for a moral foundation. Right?

Now, I get that **all of that was a bit philosophical**. But I wanted to help you see why *intention matters*, practically speaking. Why for followers of Jesus, it *matters* that *God created* us. Because that’s where we find our *intention*, our *purpose*, and therefore our *ethics*. **If God created us, it would follow that he has the right to tell us how he created us to live.** That only makes sense. **So listen: there will be quite a few things in this series that we, as followers of Jesus, can disagree on. Some things that are open-handed. But if we don’t agree that God created us—that he has a design and a purpose for us—and that knowing him looks like honoring that purpose, we’re not going to agree on most anything else. If you can’t get there, you’re going to have a hard time with most everything else we say. Because that is foundational to being a follower of Jesus: believing that God created us with intention.** We can trust God because he’s our *creator*.

Okay, **second**...we can trust God because...

## He is smarter than us.

Take a look with me at **Isaiah 55:8-9**, which says this:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

So when our son **Whit** was about three years old, he started paying really close attention to his surroundings. Especially when we were in the car, driving him to certain places around town. Before long, he learned the route, by heart, to *school*, to this *church building*, and to the closest *Target*. You know, the three most important places in life. But because he knew the way, that *also* meant that if we ever took an *alternative* route to get to one of those three places, he would get really confused. And sometimes, very *distraught*. I still remember taking him to school one time and seeing on the map that there was construction on our normal route, so I went a different way.

And I kid you not, he had a **full-blown meltdown** in the backseat about how we were going the wrong way and were gonna be late to school. “Dad—this is the wrong way! This isn’t the way to school! You’re going the wrong way; we’re going to be late—I’m never gonna get to school ahhhhhhhhh...” Just a total catastrophe in his mind. Didn’t matter how much I tried to explain to him what construction was or why we weren’t going the

normal way. All he could focus on was that he didn't know the way and that was going to affect him negatively. When in fact, I was actually attempting to avoid the precise scenario *he* wanted to avoid: him being late to school. I was just going about it a different way than what he could understand.

Okay, here's my point: **if that is the difference** in understanding between a human father and a human son, *how much more* is the difference between an all-knowing, infinite, God and us as finite, human beings. Probably pretty substantial, right? *His thoughts* are not *our* thoughts, God says. His ways are *higher* than our ways. *God* is *smarter* than *us*. **And we can trust him precisely because he is smarter than us.** So there are actually **two kinds of trust out there**. The first type of trust is the type I have for some of my good friends. I trust some of my friends, often, because of how *similar* they are to *me*. I *trust* them primarily because at least in a lot of situations, they're going to make very similar decisions to the ones *I* would've made. They're going to do things very similarly to how *I* would have done them. I trust them. But *really*, that's just an *extension* of trust in *myself*, right? I "trust" them primarily because I trust *myself*, and they're kinda like *me*.

Okay, but just so we understand: **that's not really the type of "trust"** the Scriptures call us to have in *God*. **We don't trust God because of how similar he is to us. We trust God, in many ways, because of how different he is than us.** Because he *knows* things that we don't *know*. Because he *comprehends* things that we don't *comprehend*. He sees things *coming* that we don't see coming. He understands things about *us*, that we don't even understand about *ourselves*. **And it is precisely because he is so different, smarter, wiser than us, that we can trust him.** *That's* the type of trust we're invited to have in God.

I think **this becomes especially evident** in moments when God commands or teaches things that we don't instinctively agree with. There are a lot of commands in the Scriptures that make rational and emotional *sense* to us, right? "Do not murder"? *Yeah absolutely—I get it. Murder is bad. Don't do it. I'm with that.* "Love one another as yourself"? *Yep—I'm on board. Let's do it. That makes sense to me.* "Flee sexual immorality." *Well, hold on a second on that, God. I don't know if you're aware, but basically nobody does that anymore. And that's really difficult to do. And if I live that way, people are gonna ridicule me and that's really difficult to go through.* So I don't know about the "flee sexual immorality" one. Maybe that doesn't mean what it looks like it means. How about "anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life, for my sake, will find it." *Well, I don't know Jesus. I'm not sure about that. I don't think losing my life is the best way to find it. I kinda think finding it is the best way to find it.*

See my point is that if you follow Jesus long enough, occasionally, he's gonna ask you to do *some* things that make very little rational and emotional sense to you. He's going to command some things that don't jive very much with what you inherently believe and think. But often, **those are the moments that reveal whether we trust God, or whether we've just trusted him as a projection of ourselves.** Is it possible that God could have a reason for commanding something that you don't yet understand? Is it possible that God could have a reason for commanding something that you won't ever understand? And in those moments, do you go with what *he* says? Or do you *adjust* what *he* says to be something more like what *you* would say? Pastor and author Tim Keller is fond of saying that if your version of God never disagrees with you, that's a pretty good sign that you've just invented a Godlike version of yourself.

His ways aren't our ways. His thoughts aren't our thoughts. As far as the heavens are above the earth, so is his wisdom above our wisdom. His knowledge above our knowledge. And it's precisely *because* of that, that we can trust him: because he is *smarter* than us.

Final reason I'll give you. We can trust him because...

## He is for us.

This language is threaded through a whole lot of the bible, but one place we see it laid out really clearly is in Romans 8. Take a look at this with me:

*What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?<sup>4</sup>*

So here in Romans 8, Paul has been building to this point for a while. In context, he's talking a lot about the reality of *suffering*. He knows that going through suffering can often *challenge* or even *threaten* our ability to *trust* in the goodness of God. So he wants to help his audience remember that God is *trustworthy*—even when and if their life circumstances don't *seem* to reflect that. And he *gives them* what I consider to be a pretty *rock solid* reason for believing that. It goes like this: if God is *for* us, who can be *against* us? If the creator of the world, who set everything in motion and sustains everything by the word of his power—if *that* God is *for us*—who could possibly be against us in a way that would be greater than *that*?

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:31-32



And then talks **specifically about how they can know** that God is for them. **How they can trust that.** He says that if that God who did not even spare his own *son, Jesus*, but even gave *him* up for us all, surely the God who does *that* is trustworthy in other arenas of life. Surely he is worth listening to. He's worth following. He's worth loving and obeying, even when his commands don't make 100% rational sense to us. He's worth knowing when the *worst of the worst* hits. He's worth *trusting*, because he has proven at the cross that he is committed to our good. **God is for us, and that's why we can trust him.**

And here's **why that matters** for the next six weeks of this series. If you're in the room right now, and **you haven't yet experienced** Jesus rescuing you out of your sin through the cross: then I wouldn't necessarily *expect* much of what we say in this series to be compelling to you. You're still welcome to be here, as always. You're welcome to show up and listen and process and ask questions—all of that is completely available to you. But I wouldn't *expect* for you to be on *board* with much or any of what we say. Because you haven't had the experience of being rescued by Jesus yet. And that's okay—we want that for you. But as always, we *would* suggest that you *start* there: *is Jesus who he says he is?* Did he accomplish what the bible says he accomplished? Because according to Romans 8, that is the starting place for learning to *trust* him.

But that said, **let me speak to a second** for **those of us who have** had that experience with Jesus. Those of us who would say Jesus *has* indeed *saved* us through his cross and resurrection. **If that's you, I would argue that you have every reason in the world to trust him.** I would argue that he has proven *more* trustworthy in your life more than any other person you could possibly consider trusting. **The rationale that the Scriptures use, over and over again, is that if he was good enough to come and rescue you out of your sin—not even sparing *his own son* for your sake—then he is good enough to *follow* with every aspect of your life.** If he's trustworthy enough to save us, he's good enough to *lead* us. If he's good enough to save our lives, he's good enough to *show* us the *best possible* way to live.

So I **don't know how you came in** this room this morning. I don't know where you are with Jesus, where you are with *trusting* him or *following* him. I don't know where you are with even *wanting to hear* what he has to say about life or gender or ethics or *anything else*. But here's what I want to invite you into during this series. And it might even sound a little silly or trivial to *some* people, but I wonder if it might be a good place for some of us to *start*.

I want to **ask you**, as we enter into the next six weeks of this series, that you would be willing to give the creator of the universe at least the same level of *trust* that you would give a physical trainer at the gym. Let me explain. Let's say you're at the gym working

out on your own, and you were using a piece of equipment there, and somebody who had spent years and years professionally training people told you how to use the machine you were on a little better. They helped you with your form or your approach or your pacing—whatever it is. If you knew that person had been training people for say, *twenty-five years*, and you had just started using the machine: wouldn't you at least be inclined to *hear them out*? I would hope so, right?

Or perhaps a different analogy, for those of us that haven't interacted with a personal trainer in a while (like me). What if you gave God at least the level of trust that you give your *therapist*? Think about your therapist. Generally speaking, you go to a therapist because they've received years of training in their field, they've seen quite a few clients who struggle in similar ways to you, and they are licensed to do what they do. So there is a certain level of *trust* you give them when they speak to you about your mental health, right? At least in theory.

Now listen, I'm **not trying to undersell** anything: what I *ultimately* want for *all* of us is that we would trust Jesus *far* more than we would a trainer or a counselor. The end goal is *more* than that. ~~Trusting God like one of those things is the *floor*, not the *ceiling* of obedience to Jesus.~~ I'm just trying to ask, if you're new to the whole Jesus thing, wouldn't it make sense that he would get *at least* that level of authority in your life? *At least that* amount of trust? *At least that* amount of say in how we live? My prayer is that all of us go well *beyond* that, and trust God with everything. But the *starting* point is being willing to trust him a little more than you trust yourself.

Proverbs 3:5, one of the first verses I ever learned in the bible:

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.*

If you're here and you're **new to church**, or new to Jesus, I want you to know: he is patient. He realizes it takes time to learn to trust him with everything, and he offers *help* doing that by his Spirit along the way. But it all starts with being willing to second guess your own understanding. It all starts with being willing to consider that your conclusions might not be as solid as you think they are. And it's *that* that creates a path to trusting in someone else.

**As we enter into this series**, we're going to be asking and attempting to answer a lot of questions. Some of them, very *difficult* questions. Some of them, very difficult *answers*. But underneath every single one of them, and your *response* to them, is actually one *core* question—and that's ***can God be trusted?*** That's the question that all of us as followers of Jesus are wrestling with *constantly*. Whether your particular struggle is with

your gender, or with your sexuality, or with your money, or your anger, or your anxiety, or your addiction—whatever the particular pressure point is for you. The question is actually the same for *all* of us: *is God trustworthy?*

Based on the reasons I've laid out for you today, I can tell you that I *personally* have found him to be *very* trustworthy. I can also tell you that in this room are at least 150 more people or so who have *also* landed on that answer. I can tell you story after story of men and women throughout history who have concluded that he can *be trusted*, even when *faced* with unbelievable amounts of suffering and difficulty. But at the end of the day, it's a question *you* have to answer for *you*: *can I trust this God?*

We're going to **respond** this morning by **coming to the tables** together and partaking in something called communion. Communion is where we remember the single act that, for Paul in Romans 8, *proved* that God can be trusted: the moment where God “did not even spare his own son for us, but graciously gave him up for us all. When we come to these tables, we are calling to mind and celebrating the moment when God displayed his *trustworthiness* for all of us, once and for all. So if you're a follower of Jesus and you've decided, based on that, that God can be trusted, you're invited to come to the table and celebrate that with us.

Let me pray for us and we'll respond.