

BOOK SUMMARY

On the Incarnation

Athanasius



BE UNITED IN CHRIST BOOK SUMMARY

Book Summary: On the Incarnation
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Book Summary

On the Incarnation

Athanasius

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Author

Athanasius (300–373) was a prominent bishop, an influential theologian, and a key defender of the deity of Jesus Christ. He attended the Council of Nicaea (325) assisting the Bishop of Alexandria and soon after succeeded him as head of this important church. The primary doctrinal debate of the day was whether Jesus was God. Athanasius’ unyielding defense of the full divinity of Christ resulted in five exiles totaling seventeen years. His courageous, sacrificial stand for the faith earned him the nickname “Athanasius against the World.” Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) described him as “sublime in action, lowly in mind; unattainable in virtue, most accessible in communication; gentle, free from anger, sympathetic, sweet in words, sweeter in disposition; angelic in appearance, more angelic in mind; calm in rebuke, and persuasive in praise” (*Oration 21*).¹ Athanasius died in Alexandria on May 2, 373.

Overview

On the Incarnation is the sequel to a work entitled *Against the Pagans*, which addressed the errors of idolatry. In the first work, Athanasius “briefly indicated that the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things owe their being to His will and power, and that it is through Him that the Father gives order to creation, by Him that all things are moved, and through Him that they receive their being.”² In the second work, Athanasius “sets forth what relates to the Word’s becoming man, and to His divine appearing among us.” His theme is the incarnation, the Biblical teaching that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a). This central Christian doctrine asserts that God the Word became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. Athanasius writes to explain and defend this marvelous mystery “which Jews defame and Greeks scorn, but we worship.”

On the Incarnation contains 57 chapters organized in two parts: a presentation of the incarnation of the Word and a response to those who disbelieve this essential doctrine.

Part 1: The Incarnation of the Word (1–32)

The context of the incarnation (1–5)

The purposes of the incarnation (6–19)

The climax of the incarnation (20–32)

Part 2: A Response to Unbelievers (33–55)

A response to the Jews (33–40)

A response to the Gentiles (41–55)

A brief conclusion (56–57) summarizes Athanasius’ theme and encourages the reader to turn to Scripture in order to learn “more completely and clearly the exact detail of what we have said.”

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York, NY: The Christian University Literature Company, 1894), 7:271.

² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Sister Penelope Lawson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 25.

Part 1: The Incarnation of the Word (1–32)

The Context of the Incarnation (1–5)

The proper context for understanding the incarnation is the Biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. The Word plays a central role in all four phases of redemption history.³

It is, then, proper for us to begin ... by speaking of the creation of the universe and of God its craftsman, that it may be perceived that the renewal of creation has been the work of the same Word that made it in the beginning. For it will not appear inappropriate for the Father to have accomplished its salvation by Him through whom He made it.

Thus, the same Word that was God's agent of creation is also His agent of redemption and restoration. Therefore, Athanasius begins his presentation of the incarnation not in the gospels but in Genesis.

The Bible reveals that God the Father created all things through His Son. God made men in His image, "giving them a portion of the power of His own Word, so that having a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide forever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise." The delightful destiny God intended for men was contingent, however, on their obedience to their creator's command.

He brought them into His own garden and gave them a law so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might live in paradise without sorrow, pain, or care. Additionally, God promised that they might be forever free from decay in Heaven. But if they sinned, turned back, and became evil, they would become liable to the corruption of death, which was theirs by nature—no longer to live in paradise but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and corruption.

Eternal life and death hung in the balance of man's obedience, and the tragic outcome is well known. Man sinned and God condemned him to death with no earthly hope of deliverance.

The creation and fall of man sets the stage for the incarnation of Christ and the redemption of man.

Why, having proposed to speak of the incarnation of the Word, are we presently speaking of the origin of mankind? Because this, too, belongs to the aim of our work. For in speaking of the appearing of the Savior among us, we must speak also of the origin of men. The reason He came down was because of us, for our sin called forth the lovingkindness of the Word, so that the Lord made haste to help us and appeared among men. We were the reason He became incarnate, and for our salvation He dealt with us so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body.

Adam's disobedience doomed all men to death, for they had become corrupt and ignorant of God. In love, however, the divine Word took on human nature in order to restore life and the knowledge of God.

³ Athanasius uses the title "the Word" to refer to the second person of the Trinity. Athanasius gets this term from John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1–2, 14a; see also 1 John 1:1).

The Purposes of the Incarnation (6–19)

The Incarnate Word Restored Life (6–10)

The fall of man created a dilemma for God. How could God honor His word to condemn man to death without letting sin seem to defeat His original purposes for creating man?

What was God in His goodness to do? Allow corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And what was the point of their having been made to begin with? It would have been better for them not to have been made, than, having been made, to be left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness and not goodness on God's part—if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He has made it... Once He had made men and created them out of nothing, it was unthinkable for the work to be ruined before the very eyes of their maker. It was, then, out of the question to leave men to be increasingly corrupted, because this would be improper and unworthy of God's goodness.

Thus God's glory and goodness made it right and fitting for Him to intervene. But what form would this intervention take? God could not simply demand sinful men to repent, for if men did not die, then God would be a liar. Moreover, sin had resulted in corruption, and men had forfeited the innocence and grace God had given them.

The resolution to this dilemma was the incarnation of the Word of God. "It was His role once again both to bring the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain intact the just claim of the Father upon all." The Son saw the wretched ruin of man and hastened to help. "He took pity on our race, had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption. Unable to bear that death should be master—lest the creature should perish and His Father's handiwork in men come to nothing—He takes unto Himself a human body, and one no different than ours."

God had sentenced man to death (Genesis 2:16–17), so God would have lied if man did not die. Therefore, in love the Word came to die in men's place to free them from death's dark domain. But how could the divine, eternal Word die? Only by taking upon Himself a human, mortal nature.

The Word saw that the corruption of men could be undone in no other way except through death. But it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, because He was immortal and the Son of the Father. So, He took to Himself a body capable of death, so that this body, by partaking of the Word who is above all, might be worthy to die in the place of all. Moreover, because the Word dwelt in this body, it remained incorruptible, and thus corruption might be prevented from all men by the grace of the resurrection. So, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, He immediately put away death from all His peers by offering God a substitute.

God the Word became a man so that He could save men through His death. His humanity made Him an appropriate and fitting substitute. His divinity made Him an acceptable and effective sacrifice. Thus, the incarnation was essential for salvation, "for the race of men would have gone to ruin had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to end death."

The salvation of sinners through the substitutionary death of the incarnate Word is confirmed by “the Savior’s own inspired writers.”

“For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21–22)

“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” (2 Corinthians 5:14–15)

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5)

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.” (Hebrews 2:9)

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” (Hebrews 2:14–15)

Thus, the primary purpose of the incarnation was to deliver sinners from death to life. A second, closely related purpose was to restore the knowledge of God that sinful man had forfeited.

The Incarnate Word Restored Knowledge (11–16)

God made men and women in His image so that they might know Him. “For what would it benefit man to be made if he did not know his Maker?” Indeed, knowing God is the only “happy and truly blessed life.” When men sinned, however, their theology became distorted and their worship became idolatrous. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and “worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25a). As a result, “the world was full of atheism and lawlessness, and neither God nor His Word was known.”

Man’s ignorance of God was not God’s fault, for He had revealed Himself in many ways. First, God made man in His image, which should have been sufficient “to make known God the Word, and through Him the Father.” Additionally, God had revealed Himself through the works of creation so that His presence was evident around men as well as within them. God also spoke through the Law and the Prophets, which were “for all the world a holy school of the knowledge of God and the conduct of the soul.” Thus, God had revealed Himself in human nature, in creation, and in Scripture. Yet men, “overcome by the pleasures of the moment and by the illusions and deceits sent by demons, did not raise their heads toward the truth, but weighed themselves down all the more with evils and sins, so that they no longer appeared rational but irrational.”

Man's persistent rejection of the knowledge of God added another aspect to the divine dilemma.

What was God to do? To keep silent at so great a thing and allow men to be led astray by demons and not to know God? And what was the use of man having been originally made in God's image? For it would have been better for him to have been made simply like a brute animal, than, once made rational, for him to live the life of the brutes.

God resolved the issue of man's ignorance the same way He solved the problem of his death, through the incarnation of the Word. To restore the knowledge of God to sinners, the Word first needed to restore the image of God in man so that they could regain the capacity to know God.

What then was God to do? Or what was to be done except the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know Him? But how could this have come to pass except by the presence of the very image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ?

Athanasius illustrates this aspect of Jesus' ministry with an analogy from art.

When a likeness painted on a panel has been obscured by stains, the whose likeness it is must return so that his image can be renewed on the same wood. For the sake of his picture, not even the wood on which it is painted is thrown away, but rather the outline is renewed on it. In the same way, the most holy Son of the Father, being the image of the Father, came to our world to renew man who was made in His likeness, and find him, though lost, through the forgiveness of sins. As He says Himself in the gospels: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

Jesus makes it possible for sinners to be born again, which allows them to be restored into the image of the Son of God (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Another dimension to Jesus' restoration of the true knowledge of God was His teaching. Men had ignored, distorted, or rejected God's revelation of Himself. So, the creator stepped into the creation to model and explain to them what they needed to know in order to return to Him. Since sinners were so focused on the physical world, the Word became present to their senses. "The Word of God takes to Himself a body and as Man walks among men and meets the senses of all men. He does this so that those who think that God exists in material form may, from what the Lord accomplishes by His body, perceive the truth and through Him recognize the Father."

Through His words and works, Jesus both taught about God His Father and revealed that He Himself was God. No one had ever taught and lived like Christ, and His model, His miracles, and His message all proclaimed Him to be no mere man but Emmanuel, God with us. Christ's ministry, including the displays of His own divinity, explains why He did not die at an earlier age. "He did not immediately upon His coming accomplish His sacrifice on behalf of all.... But, by abiding in the world, doing such works, and showing such signs, He made Himself known no longer as simply a man, but as God the Word."

Thus, according to Athanasius, the Word became flesh for two principal purposes: to restore life by destroying death and to restore knowledge by removing ignorance. "By His becoming man, the Savior accomplished both works of love," and both could only be accomplished by the God-man.

The Incarnate Word Was Both God and Man (17–19)

Exactly how Jesus could simultaneously exist as both God and man is a mystery, so Athanasius corrects some possible misunderstandings about the eternal Word taking on human nature. First, the Word's presence in a human body does not imply that, as God, He was not also present everywhere, actively sustaining everything.

Even while present in a human body and Himself giving life to it, He was giving life to the universe as well. He was in every process of nature and yet remained outside of nature. While known from the body by His works, He was nonetheless revealed by the working of the universe as well.... And this was the wonderful thing, that He was at once walking as man, and as the Word was giving life to all things, and as the Son was dwelling with His Father.

Just as God was especially present in the tabernacle and temple but remained present everywhere else, so the Word truly resided in a body while at the same time continuing to exist in all places.

Second, in reading the Bible's accounts of Christ, one must keep in mind that some texts pertain to His humanity while others address His divinity. Physical acts such as eating, drinking, resting, and sleeping demonstrate that the Word was truly a man. Miraculous acts such as healing illnesses, casting out demons, controlling nature, and feeding the multitudes indicate that He was truly God. It is no contradiction to observe that some Scriptures affirm Jesus' humanity while others confirm His divinity. It is only because the incarnate Word was both God and man that He was able to replace death and ignorance with life and truth, and both of these saving works were completed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Climax of the Incarnation (20–32)

The Death of the Incarnate Word (20–25)

Though Jesus' human nature was mortal, His divine nature was not, and therefore when He died He actually conquered death. "And so it was that two marvels came to pass at once, that the death of all was accomplished in the Lord's body, and that death and corruption were entirely removed because of the Word that was united with it." The Word identified Himself with men in order to suffer their death, and the Word invites men to identify themselves with Him so that He might grant them His life. As a result, even though those in Christ still die, they will rise again in triumph over death to live in the newness of resurrection life.

Like the seeds which are cast into the earth, we do not perish, but, sown in the earth, shall rise again, because death has been brought to nothing by the grace of the Savior. So it is that blessed Paul, who was made a witness of the resurrection, says: "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" (1 Corinthians 15:53–55).

Though Christ's victory over death and Hades should be celebrated, some protest or question whether it was fitting for the Son of God to die so gruesome a death as crucifixion. Therefore, Athanasius addresses several objections and questions from both outside the church and within.

Some wonder why Jesus underwent a shameful public execution rather than dying with dignity in private. Athanasius responds that if Jesus had died privately, then people would have assumed that He had died of natural causes and was therefore like other men. Moreover, if He had died from illness people would question whether His miraculous healings had actually occurred. A more fundamental reason for Jesus' public death was to make the preaching of His resurrection more believable. "If the death of His body had taken place anywhere in secret, the death not being apparent nor taking place before witnesses, His resurrection too would have been hidden and without evidence." The publicity of Calvary lent power to the apostles' preaching, for their early audiences were better able to receive news of Jesus' resurrection because they had witnessed His crucifixion.

As to why Christ did not avoid death altogether, Athanasius reminds his readers that the Word became flesh for the very purpose of dying. Christmas occurred so that Good Friday and Easter could follow. Indeed, the Savior did not flee death but pursued it in order to make a public spectacle of its defeat. Christ's victory over death was all the more glorious because He faced it in whatever terrible form His enemies chose to inflict it.

A noble wrestler, great in skill and courage, does not pick his own opponents lest he raise suspicion that he is afraid to face someone. Instead, he lets the onlookers choose, especially if they are his enemies, so that he might throw and show himself superior to whomever they match against him. In the same way, the life of all, our Lord and Savior, Christ, did not devise a death for His own body, so as not to appear to fear some forms of death. Instead, He accepted the cross and endured a death inflicted by others, and above all by His enemies, which they thought dreadful, shameful, and daunting. He did this so that, by destroying even this means of dying, He Himself might be believed to be the life and so that the power of death would be brought utterly to nothing. So something surprising and startling has happened: the death, which they thought to inflict as a disgrace, was actually a monument of victory against death itself.

Though His enemies chose the means of His execution, Jesus "kept His body undivided and in perfect soundness, so that no excuse would ever be given to those that would divide the church."

For Christians who wonder why their beloved Lord had to be crucified, Athanasius reminds them of the Biblical need for the Savior to die on a cross. Jesus came to bear man's curse and therefore had to die a cursed death, as it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13b; see Deuteronomy 21:23). Similarly, Jesus had said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32). Therefore, He needed to die lifted in the air by the cross, which also was a fitting place to defeat the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2b). Finally, it was fitting for Christ to die with His arms extended, since through His death He reached out to draw both Jews and Gentiles to Himself to form them into one new man (Ephesians 2:14–16).

Christ's crucifixion set the stage for His resurrection. "While He made creation witness to the presence of its maker, He did not allow the temple of His body to remain long. Instead, having merely shown it to be dead by the contact of death with it, He raised it up on the third day. He carried away, as the mark of His victory and triumph over death, the incorruptibility and immunity from pain and suffering which was produced in His resurrection body."

The Resurrection of the Incarnate Word (26–32)

Although God could have restored Jesus to life immediately after death, He delayed three days in order to prove to everyone that His Son had actually died. God was also intentional not to delay any longer than three days lest people begin to wonder if the resurrection appearances were really Jesus. The fact that Jesus appeared in full strength and with no signs of decay demonstrated that His resurrection signified the death of death. The terrible and dreaded enemy of death was vanquished by the incarnate Word to liberate believers to enjoy life with God forever.

Jesus' followers clearly grasped the implications of His death, for the resurrection forever changed the way God's people faced death. This transformed attitude towards death was, for Athanasius, one of the primary proofs of the resurrection.

Now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, for all who believe in Christ tread it under foot as nothing and choose rather to die than to deny their faith in Christ. For they truly know that when they die they are not destroyed but actually begin to live and become incorruptible through the resurrection. And that devil that once maliciously exulted in death, now that its pains were loosed, remained the only one truly dead.

The resurrection gives believers the boldness and resolution to follow their Good Shepherd faithfully, even through the valley of death itself.

Another compelling proof of the resurrection is the evident activity of the risen Christ throughout the world. Dead men do not act, but the testimony of Jesus' powerful accomplishments clearly indicate that He has risen.

How, if He is no longer active (for this is a peculiar trait of a dead person), does He prevent from their activity those who are active and alive, so that the adulterer no longer commits adultery, and the murderer murders no more, nor is the one inflicting wrong greedy any longer, and the ungodly is now religious? Or how, if He is not risen but dead, does He drive away, and pursue, and cast down those false gods said by the unbelievers to be alive? ... If it be true that a dead person can exert no power, how then does the Savior daily do so many works, drawing men to religion, persuading to virtue, teaching of immortality, leading on to a desire for heavenly things, revealing the knowledge of the Father, inspiring strength to meet death, showing Himself to each one, and displacing the godlessness of idolatry?

It is exciting to hear the triumphal tone in Athanasius' voice as he proudly proclaims the mighty victories and righteous deeds of his risen and reigning king. For him, all growth in Christianity and all decline in false religions are to be credited to the resurrected Christ. Conversion, conviction, sanctification, and success in ministry are all indications that the head of the church is indeed alive and active in expanding His church.

Part 2: A Response to Unbelievers (33–55)

In Part 1, Athanasius set the context for the incarnation (1–5), explained the main purposes of the incarnation (6–19), and presented and defended the climax of the incarnation (20–32). In Part 2, he responds to those who deny the incarnation and crucifixion of the Word (33–55). “The resurrection of His body and the victory gained over death by the Savior being clearly proved, come now, let us put to rebuke both the disbelief of the Jews and the scoffing of the Gentiles.” Athanasius addresses both groups’ objections on their own grounds, the Jews from Scripture and the Gentiles from reason.

A Response to the Jews (33–40)

Jesus Himself modeled how to reason with the Jews from their own writings, and His apostles became well-versed in “showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:28b). In the same way, Athanasius demonstrates from the Old Testament that God had long predicted the person, death, crucifixion, and ministry of His Son. For example:

“They pierced My hands and My feet; / I can count all My bones. / They look and stare at Me. / They divide My garments among them, / And for My clothing they cast lots.” (Psalm 22:16c–18)

“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14; see Matthew 1:23)

“And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, / Who shall stand as a banner to the people; / For the Gentiles shall seek Him, / And His resting place shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

The detailed description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 is especially compelling:

He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows;
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.
But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (vv. 3–6)

So numerous and specific are the prophecies concerning Christ that Athanasius concludes, “The whole inspired Scripture cries aloud concerning these things ... that none should err for lack of instruction.”

A Response to the Gentiles (41–55)

The Jews admitted that Jesus was a man but denied that He was God. On the other hand, many Gentiles admitted that Christ might be divine in some sense but denied that a divine being would become a man. The Greek philosopher Plato taught that the spiritual world was good but the material world was evil. This made many disbelieve that God would take on a material, human form. Athanasius explains that this objection is both illogical and disproved by the evident divine powers exercised by Christ.

Since Gentiles acknowledge evidence of a higher being working in nature, why could God not reveal Himself and work through a human nature? For those who protest that a divine being would not assume so humble a form, Athanasius explains that God stooped as low as love required to teach and heal sinful men. Following the fall it was not possible for God to communicate with men as He had in Eden, for they had lost the capacity to recognize and respond to their master's voice. Moreover, the corruption of sin was so much a part of human nature that the only way to heal it was for God Himself to take on human nature.

Even those too blind to see God's handiwork in the heavens should be able to observe the accomplishments of Christ on earth and know that He was no mere man. In an age filled with the false worship of countless gods, Christ convinced men from every culture and region "to worship one and the same Lord, and through Him God, His Father." Using ordinary, uneducated men, He "persuaded whole churches full of men to despise death and to mind the things of immortality, to overlook what is temporary and to turn their eyes to what is eternal, to think nothing of earthly glory and to strive only for the heavenly."

Jesus inspires and enables men and women to willingly live pure lives and die martyr's deaths. He made warlike cultures peaceful, healed diseases of every kind, and then defeated death itself. His accomplishments are more numerous than can ever be counted.

The achievements of the Savior, resulting from His becoming man, are of such kind and number that if one should wish to number them, he may be compared to men who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves. A person cannot take in the whole of the waves with his eyes, for those which are coming in confuse the sense of him who attempts it. So it is with someone who would take in all the achievements of Christ in the body. It is impossible to take in the whole, even by counting them up, because those which go beyond his thought are more than those he thinks he has taken in.

Athanasius closes by reminding us that it is impossible to comprehend all that the incarnate, risen Christ has done and is presently doing.

Conclusion (56–57)

The Scriptures, which “were spoken and written by God,” reveal not only that the Word came but also that He is coming again, and that Christians must be ready for that day.

He is to come, no more to suffer, but from then on to render to all the fruit of His own cross, that is, the resurrection and an incorruptible body (1 Peter 1:23). He will no longer be judged but will judge everyone by what each has done in the body, whether good or evil. There is laid up for the good the kingdom of Heaven, but for them that have done evil, everlasting fire and outer darkness.... For this very reason there is a word of the Savior to prepare us for that day: “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). For, according to Paul, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Those who approach God’s Word in humble holiness will understand what He has revealed, and those who respond in faithful obedience will receive God’s reward. As Paul encouraged Timothy, “There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8).

Appraisal

On the Incarnation is a classic explanation of why the Word became flesh, a doctrine that is essential for salvation. As the apostle John writes, “Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 John 4:2b–3a). Athanasius demonstrates that the proper context for understanding the incarnation is the history of redemption, for God became a man in order to restore sinful men to Himself. Christ came to give dying men life and deceived men truth. His death and resurrection display the depth of His love and the height of His power as He defeated Satan and death. Athanasius’ classic work is Biblical, practical, and worshipful, which is why it remains an enduring classic to help Christ’s church better understand and adore the mystery of the incarnation.

Connection to Be United in Christ

The central Christian confession is that “Jesus is Lord.” This is the heart of the church’s preaching, which the Holy Spirit enables people to believe so that they may be saved (2 Corinthians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9). Jesus’ lordship must be honored by every believer, and one day it will be acknowledged by unbelievers as well (1 Peter 3:15; Philippians 2:11). Every believer, every church, and every denomination must confess “Jesus is Lord” to be Christian. Here, then, is the central hub around which all Christians must unite.

But what does it mean to confess that the man Jesus is God the Lord? Why did the Son of God become the Son of Man? Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation* offers one of the earliest and most influential responses to these questions. Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox believers all turn to this enduring work to help them understand and adore the miracle of Immanuel, “God with us.” By focusing on their common confession of Christ and the Biblical, historical understanding of His incarnation, Christians can better love and serve their Lord and can also better Be United in Christ.

Key Quotations

“It is, then, proper for us to begin ... by speaking of the creation of the universe and of God its craftsman, that it may be perceived that the renewal of creation has been the work of the same Word that made it in the beginning. For it will not appear inappropriate for the Father to have accomplished its salvation by Him through whom He made it.” (1)

“He brought them into His own garden and gave them a law so that, if they kept the grace and remained good, they might live in paradise without sorrow, pain, or care. Additionally, God promised that they might be forever free from decay in Heaven. But if they sinned, turned back, and became evil, they would become liable to the corruption of death, which was theirs by nature—no longer to live in paradise but cast out of it from that time forth to die and to abide in death and corruption.” (3)

“In speaking of the appearing of the Savior among us, we must speak also of the origin of men. The reason He came down was because of us, for our sin called forth the lovingkindness of the Word, so that the Lord made haste to help us and appeared among men. We were the reason He became incarnate, and for our salvation He dealt with us so lovingly as to appear and be born even in a human body.” (4)

“He took pity on our race, had mercy on our infirmity, and condescended to our corruption. Unable to bear that death should be master—lest the creature should perish and His Father’s handiwork in men come to nothing—He takes unto Himself a body, and one no different than ours.” (8)

“The Word saw that the corruption of men could be undone in no other way except through death. But it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, because He was immortal and the Son of the Father. So, He took to Himself a body capable of death, so that this body, by partaking of the Word who is above all, might be worthy to die in the place of all.” (9)

“For the race of men would have gone to ruin had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to end death.” (9)

“The Word of God takes to Himself a body and as Man walks among men and meets the senses of all men. He does this so that those who think that God exists in material form may, from what the Lord accomplishes by His body, perceive the truth and through Him recognize the Father.” (15)

“By His becoming man, the Savior accomplished both works of love—first, in putting away death from us and renewing us again; secondly, being unseen and invisible, in manifesting and making Himself known by His works to be the Word of the Father, and the Ruler and King of the universe.” (16)

“Now that the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we, the faithful in Christ, no longer die the death as before.... Instead, corruption ceasing and being put away by the grace of the resurrection, we are only dissolved, agreeably to our bodies’ mortal nature ... that we may be able to gain a better resurrection. Like the seeds which are cast into the earth, we do not perish, but, sown in the earth, shall rise again, because death has been brought to nothing by the grace of the Savior.” (21)

“So something surprising and startling has happened: the death, which they thought to inflict as a disgrace, was actually a monument of victory against death itself.” (24)

“The achievements of the Savior, resulting from His becoming man, are of such kind and number that if one should wish to number them, he may be compared to men who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves.” (54)

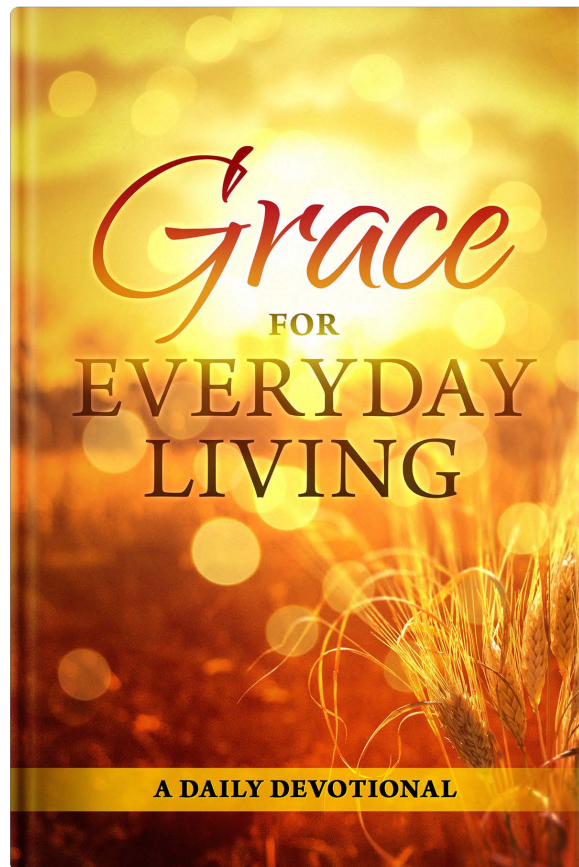
Key Bible Passages (NASB)

“Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,’ which translated means, ‘GOD WITH US.’” (Matthew 1:22–23)
“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.” (Matthew 24:42)
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” (John 1:1–3, 14a)
“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)
“For what the Law could not do ... God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin ... so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us.” (Romans 8:3–4a)
“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10)
“For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity ... so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.” (Ephesians 2:14–15)
“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” (Philippians 2:5–7)
“Yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.” (Colossians 1:22)
“By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:16)
“Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He ... also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” (Hebrews 2:14)
“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” (1 Peter 3:18)
“Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.” (1 John 2:22)
“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” (1 John 4:2–3a)
“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.” (2 John 7)

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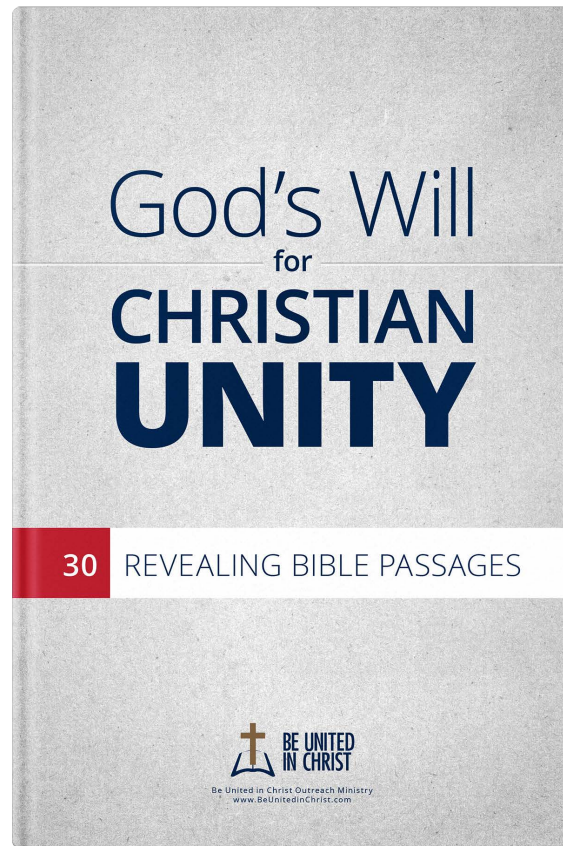


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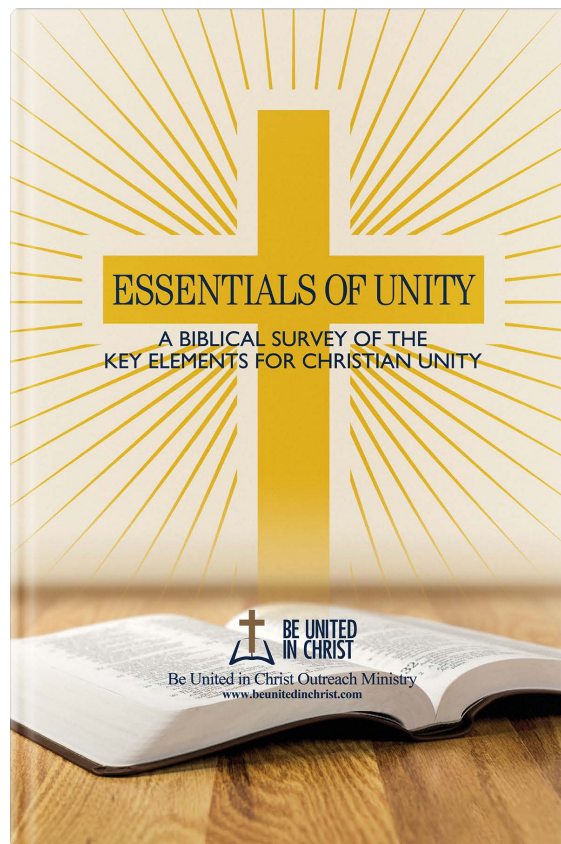
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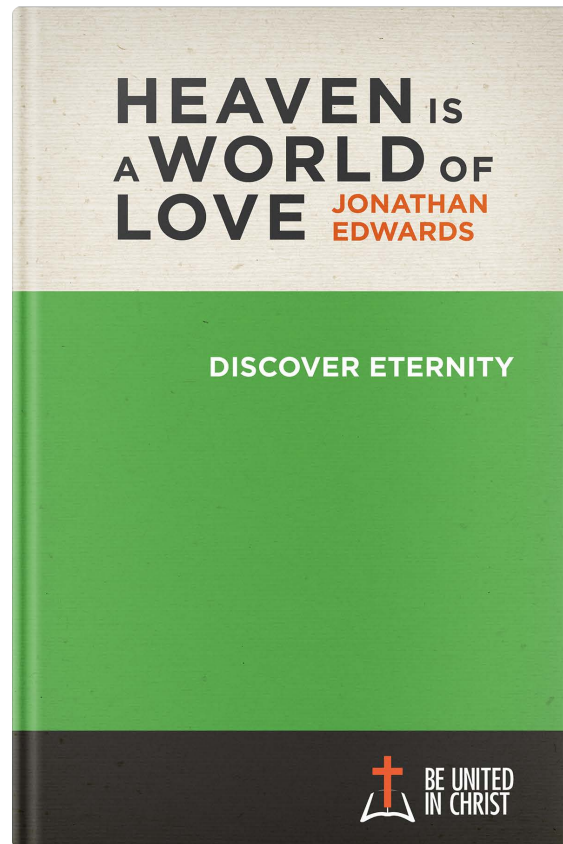
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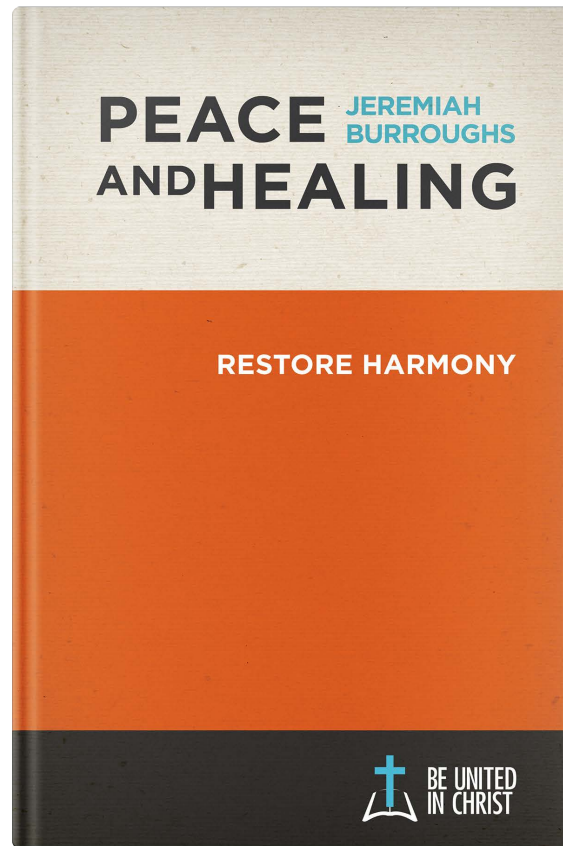


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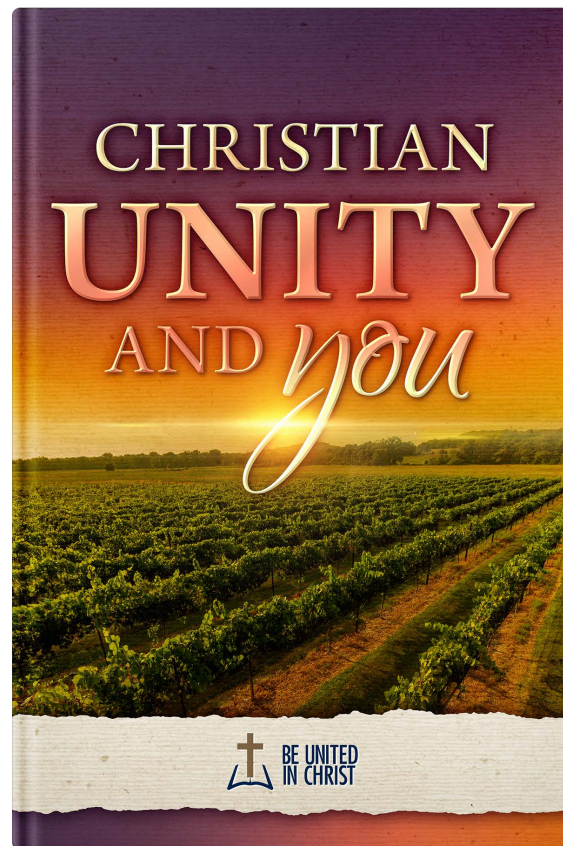


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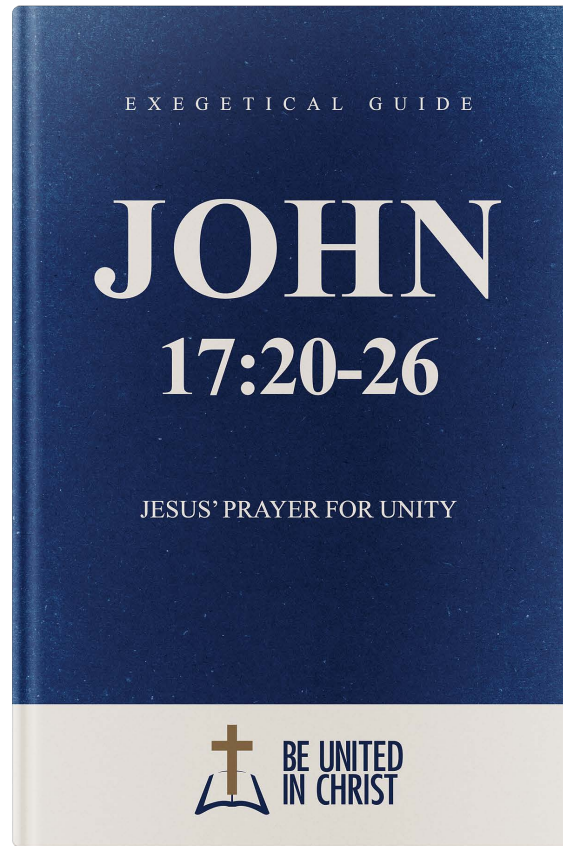


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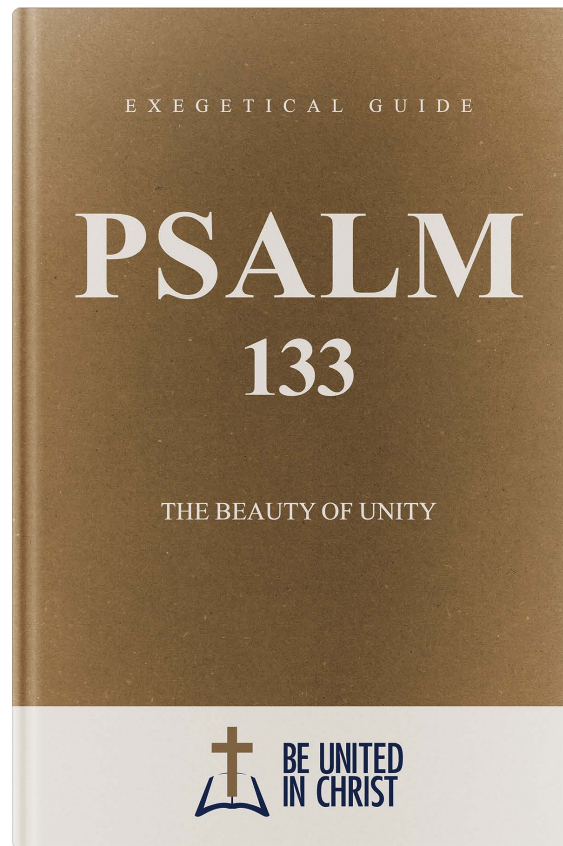


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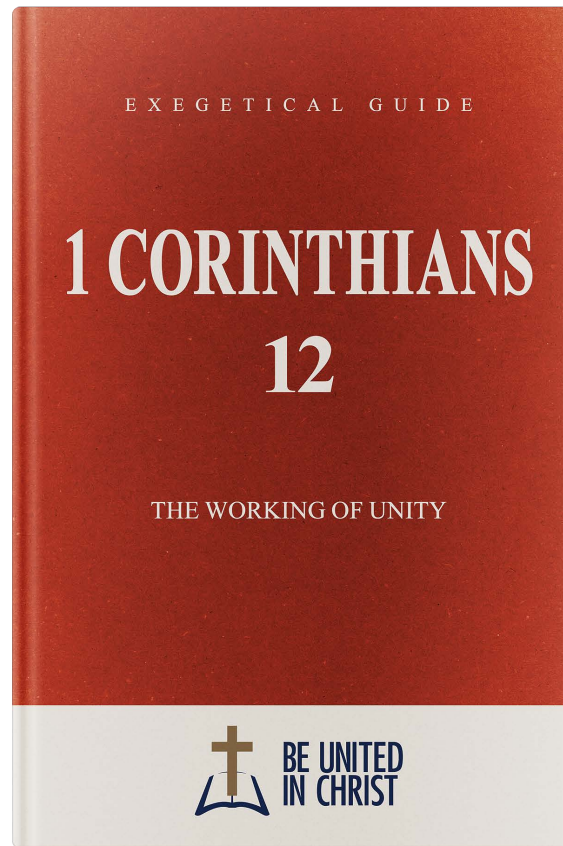


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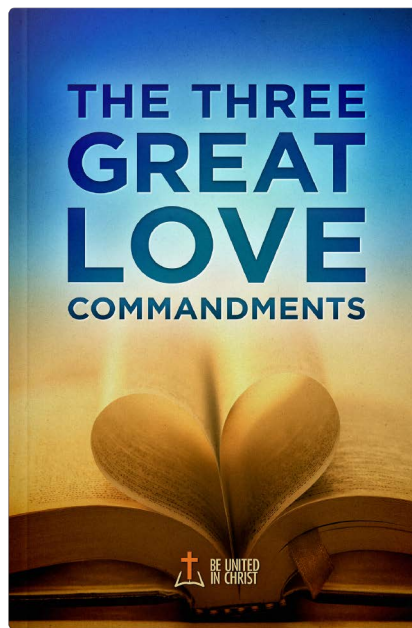


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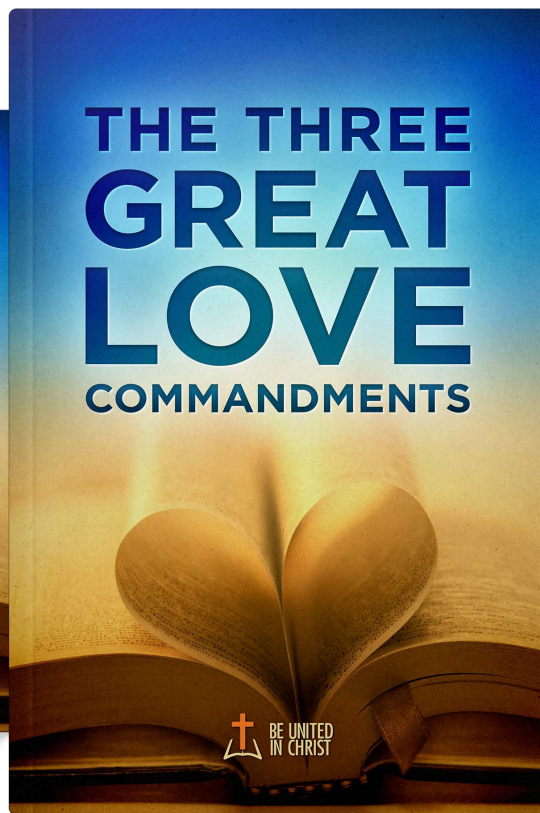
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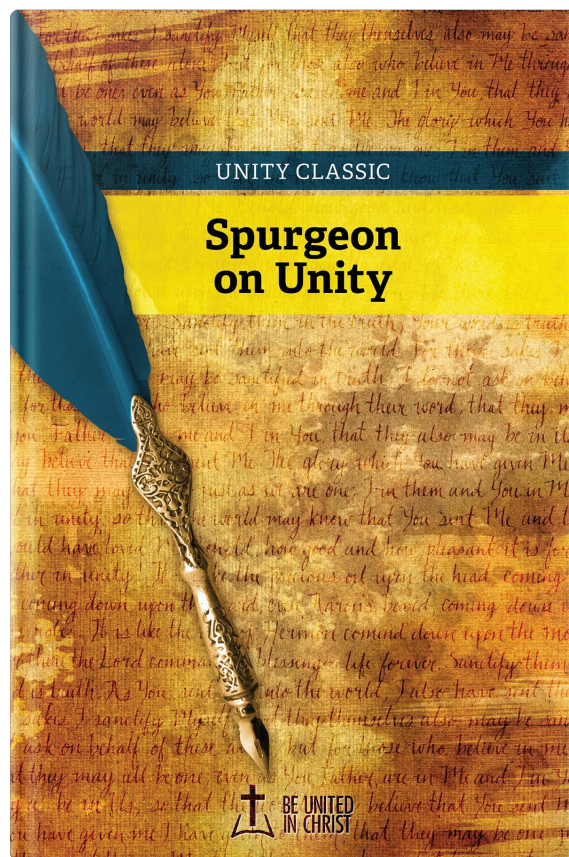
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