

Preface

Standing on What Holds

Most people do not spend their lives asking whether they believe in God. They are far more concerned with whether life itself can be trusted—whether it will hold under pressure, whether it makes sense of joy and suffering, whether it offers anything solid enough to stand on.

We build our lives on explanations. Some are inherited, some are assembled over time, and others are adopted simply because they seem to work. We trust ideas about progress, identity, freedom, goodness, and success to give our lives stability. Yet many discover—sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly—that these explanations do not bear weight. Anxiety increases. Meaning feels fragile. Guilt resurfaces no matter how carefully it is buried. What once felt firm begins to shift.

This book begins with a simple observation: much of modern life is spent trying to stand on ground that was never meant to hold us.

The Bible often speaks of foundations, ground, and rock, not as poetic decoration, but as descriptions of reality. Some ground shifts. Some ground absorbs

Where to Stand Preview

effort but produces nothing. Some ground hides what we would rather forget, only to uncover it again later. Other ground is solid—capable of bearing weight, sustaining life, and enduring exposure.

Jesus once described human life in these terms. One person builds on sand, another on rock. Both build. Both hope. Both intend permanence. The difference is not effort or sincerity, but whether the ground beneath them can hold.

That image is often reduced to a warning about storms. But the problem is deeper than crisis. Sand does not only fail when trouble comes; it fails every day. It shifts with the wind. It resists growth. It intrudes everywhere. It obscures vision. Life lived on sand requires constant adjustment just to remain upright, and even then, nothing truly settles.

Rock is different. Rock holds. Rock anchors. Rock allows soil to gather, roots to take hold, and life to grow. Rock bears weight without collapse and remains steady long after surface conditions change.

This book argues that the Christian message—what the Bible calls salvation—is not primarily about emotional comfort, moral improvement, or religious belonging. It is about where a person stands. Salvation is not merely rescue from a moment of danger; it is relocation from unstable ground to solid

Where to Stand Preview

footing. It is being placed where truth, justice, forgiveness, and hope can finally rest without sinking.

That claim carries serious implications. If there is such a thing as solid ground, then not all explanations of life are equally reliable. If there is a foundation that holds, then some of what we trust now must be provisional at best—and deceptive at worst. And if Jesus Christ is that foundation, then He is not merely a spiritual option among many, but the underlying reality upon which life was always meant to stand.

The purpose of this book is not to pressure belief, manipulate emotion, or win arguments. Its aim is clarity. It seeks to examine the ground we currently trust, to test whether it can bear the weight we place upon it, and to present Jesus Christ as He is—not as an abstract idea or moral teacher, but as the Rock revealed beneath the sand.

The chapters that follow move deliberately. They begin with shared human experience: instability, moral tension, and the sense that something is not holding. They then turn to the person and work of Christ—His incarnation, His death, and His resurrection—as decisive acts that secure a foundation capable of bearing reality itself. Finally, they consider what it means to step off collapsing ground and stand where life can grow.

Where to Stand Preview

Nothing in this book requires prior theological training. But it does require honesty—about the weight life places on us, and about whether what we trust can truly support it.

If you have ever felt that the explanations you rely on keep shifting beneath your feet, this book is written for you. Not to offer a mirage of stability, but to point you toward ground that holds.

This book does not begin by asking you to believe—but by asking whether what you trust can actually hold you.

James J. Burke

Marinette, Wisconsin

January, 2026

Where to Stand Preview

I

Life in the Sand

Where to Stand Preview

1

Who Are You?

It Depends Who's Asking

Ask someone today, “Who are you?” and the honest answer is often, “Which version?”

The answer changes depending on the room, the crowd, the platform, or the moment. At work, one identity is emphasized—competent, agreeable, careful. Online, another—opinionated, principled, curated. Among friends, a different one still—relaxed, ironic, selectively honest. Certain parts of the self are highlighted, others carefully hidden.

This isn't dishonesty. It's survival.

Large numbers of people now admit openly that they do not feel free to speak their minds, not because of legal consequences, but because of social ones.¹

Where to Stand Preview

Many have learned—through experience rather than theory—that saying the wrong thing can cost relationships, reputation, or opportunity. Silence often feels safer than honesty.

A person quickly learns that the same sentence can sound acceptable in one setting and dangerous in another. A joke that lands with friends would be risky at work. An opinion shared online might need to be softened—or deleted—before a family gathering. Silence in one space is wisdom; in another, it is read as hostility.

Identity has become situational. What once felt like authenticity now feels conditional—something that must be managed rather than expressed.

Living Inside a Sorting System

Modern society is organized around identity categories.

Race, sexuality, gender expression, political persuasion, education, income, trauma, hobbies, fandoms, moral stances—each functions as a sorting mechanism. These labels are treated as explanatory: this is who you are, therefore this is how you think, vote, behave, and belong.

In professional environments, this pressure becomes especially visible. A majority of workers report that

Where to Stand Preview

they actively “cover”—downplaying or concealing parts of who they are—in order to fit in.² They learn which opinions are safe, which stories are best left untold, and which parts of themselves might quietly complicate advancement or acceptance.

Even leisure becomes diagnostic. What you watch, play, read, or follow is treated as a signal. A credential may grant authority in one space and suspicion in another. A personal story of suffering may earn sympathy—or be dismissed as insufficient compared to someone else’s.

The problem is not that these things are meaningless. The problem is that none of them are stable enough to carry the full weight being placed upon them.

They overlap. They conflict. Their meanings shift. What grants acceptance in one space can provoke rejection in another. What once secured belonging can later invite scrutiny or exclusion.

So identity must be constantly recalculated.

Middle School Never Ended

For many adults, this produces a familiar feeling—one most people thought they had left behind.

Life begins to feel like middle school with adult consequences.

Where to Stand Preview

Social groups form and dissolve. Language changes quickly. Status is fragile. People learn to scan conversations before entering them, to measure how far they can speak before needing to qualify or retreat. Those who don't fully fit within a single ideological or social "bundle" often feel the pressure most intensely, discovering that partial agreement is no longer enough to secure belonging.³

Nuance becomes risky. Independence becomes lonely.

Being on the wrong side of a disagreement—or even silent at the wrong moment—can cost social standing, professional opportunity, or relational access. Everyone is watching everyone else, and no one is quite sure what the rules are anymore.

The stakes are higher now, but the dynamics are the same. Belonging is provisional. Identity is public. Mistakes are remembered and reinterpreted.

This is not immaturity. It is what happens when identity is treated as social currency rather than something grounded.

When Identity Has No Weight

The deeper problem is not that identity matters too much, but that it is being asked to carry more weight than it can hold.

Where to Stand Preview

Identity is now expected to do the work once done by family, faith, tradition, vocation, and community. It must explain who you are, justify why you belong, defend your moral standing, and protect you from judgment—all at once.

That is an impossible load.

When identity is built on social recognition, it feels solid only as long as recognition lasts. Approval provides temporary support, but it cannot bear pressure. The moment that approval wavers—or turns—the ground beneath identity gives way.

This is why so many people feel anxious even when they are affirmed.

Affirmed, but Still Afraid

Affirmation was never designed to carry identity.

It feels stabilizing at first. Being seen, validated, or included brings relief. But relief fades quickly, because affirmation depends on continued alignment. It must be renewed. It must be maintained. It can be withdrawn.

People sense this intuitively.

A person who is affirmed today wonders what will be required tomorrow. Will the same language still be

Where to Stand Preview

acceptable? Will the same stance still be praised? Will yesterday's ally become today's critic?

So affirmation becomes something to manage rather than enjoy. Identity remains light, brittle, easily shaken.

Identity Under Pressure

Pressure exposes weight limits.

A professional setback, a public disagreement, a personal failure—these moments reveal whether identity can hold. For many, identity collapses not because they lack sincerity, but because what they were standing on was never meant to bear strain.

A label that once felt empowering now feels confining. A group that once offered belonging now demands conformity. A narrative that once explained everything now requires constant revision.

When identity is challenged, people instinctively rush to defend it—not because they are proud, but because collapse feels imminent.

Identity without weight cannot absorb shock.

Why Guilt Breaks Through

This is also why guilt behaves so stubbornly in modern life.

Where to Stand Preview

When identity is fragile, guilt becomes dangerous. It threatens not just behavior, but belonging. So it must be minimized, reframed, or redirected as quickly as possible.

People learn to explain themselves before being asked. They preemptively qualify statements. They compare themselves to worse examples. They insist on context—not always dishonestly, but desperately.

Yet guilt has a way of resurfacing.

A memory intrudes. A pattern repeats. A failure contradicts the story being told. And because identity is already under strain, guilt feels heavier than it should.

It isn't heavier.

The ground is lighter.

Justice Without Resolution

The same lack of weight affects justice.

Outrage feels intense because it is carrying more than it should. It is expected to secure moral standing, restore balance, and signal belonging—all at once. But outrage cannot resolve what identity cannot carry.

So justice becomes performative. Statements are made. Positions are declared. But nothing settles. The sense of moral imbalance remains.

Where to Stand Preview

People care deeply about justice while quietly suspecting that it never truly arrives.

Identity cannot hold what justice requires.

The Quiet Fear Beneath It All

Beneath the public language of identity lies a quieter fear: What if this doesn't hold when it matters most?

This fear does not belong only to those on the margins. It belongs equally to those at the center. In fact, it often intensifies with status, visibility, or influence, because there is more to lose.

Identity that depends on recognition must always be defended.

And anything that must always be defended is already unstable.

The Question Beneath the Labels

This is why so many people feel anxious even when they are accepted, and defensive even when they are affirmed.

They sense something is wrong, but they can't quite name it.

The problem is not that identity is important.

Where to Stand Preview

The problem is that identity has been placed on ground that cannot hold it.

So before asking who you are, a more basic question must be answered:

What are you standing on?

Because until the ground is solid, no identity can be stable.

Why Identity Is So Hard to Hold

Identity was never meant to be generated from within.

Human beings discover who they are in relationship—through belonging, recognition, and continuity over time. Identity forms where there is stability: shared language, shared expectations, shared memory.

But when those structures weaken, identity becomes difficult not because people are confused, but because the conditions required for identity formation are missing.

Today, the social signposts that once helped people locate themselves are shifting constantly. Language changes quickly. Moral expectations evolve unevenly. Communities fragment and re-form. Connections are stressed by mobility, technology, and distrust.

The result is not freedom, but uncertainty.

Where to Stand Preview

People are told to “be themselves” at the very moment when there is no stable reference for what that means. They are encouraged to construct identity from the inside while the outside world continually redefines what will be recognized or rejected.

This creates an impossible task.

Identity Without Anchors

When identity must be generated internally, it becomes fragile.

A person can know what they feel today and doubt it tomorrow. They can believe something sincerely and be told it is outdated or harmful. They can commit to a role, a community, or a cause—only to find that its meaning has shifted underneath them.

Without shared anchors, identity becomes provisional. It holds only until the environment changes.

This is why identity feels exhausting rather than empowering. It must be continually reinforced because nothing outside the self confirms it for long.

Connection Under Strain

At the same time, relationships—the very places where identity once stabilized—are under strain.

Where to Stand Preview

People move more often. Communities are thinner. Trust is fragile. Disagreement feels dangerous. Social interaction is increasingly mediated and public.

This makes identity both more visible and more vulnerable.

People are expected to present a coherent self while navigating fractured connections. They must maintain identity without the support systems that once made identity possible.

The result is not self-knowledge, but anxiety.

Why This Matters

This difficulty is not a personal failure. It is a structural problem.

Identity cannot be sustained where belonging is conditional and recognition is unstable. Asking people to build themselves in such conditions is like asking them to build on sand while the wind keeps changing direction.

Until there is stable ground beneath identity, identity will remain difficult to hold—no matter how sincere the effort.

When Nothing Fully Settles

When identity must be constantly managed, life begins to feel unsettled even when nothing is obviously wrong.

On the surface, things may appear stable. Work continues. Relationships function. Daily routines hold. But beneath that surface, there is a persistent sense that nothing quite lands. Decisions feel provisional. Convictions feel temporary. Confidence fades quickly and must be reinforced again and again.

People often describe this feeling as anxiety or restlessness, but those words don't quite capture it. It is less a spike of fear and more a low-grade instability—a sense that life requires constant adjustment just to remain upright.

Nothing ever fully settles.

The Subtle Instability of Everyday Life

This instability shows up in small, ordinary ways.

People replay conversations long after they end, wondering how they were perceived. They hesitate before speaking, weighing not just whether something is true, but how it might be interpreted. They soften statements, add disclaimers, or avoid topics altogether—not because they have nothing to say, but because saying the wrong thing feels costly.

Where to Stand Preview

Even success brings unease. A promotion raises new expectations. Recognition creates pressure to remain consistent. Being seen increases vulnerability. Relief never quite becomes rest.

Identity that depends on shifting recognition cannot relax.

Confidence That Requires Maintenance

When nothing settles, confidence becomes something that must be maintained rather than enjoyed.

People feel confident only while things are going well —while affirmation continues, alignment holds, and approval remains intact. The moment conditions change, confidence drains away.

So energy is spent maintaining alignment: staying current with language, tracking social cues, monitoring reactions. The self is continually adjusted to remain acceptable.

This is not vanity. It is what happens when identity is unsupported.

Meaning That Must Be Rebuilt

Instability also affects meaning.

Where to Stand Preview

People speak about purpose and values with sincerity, but those meanings feel vulnerable to disruption. A moral failure, a public conflict, or a personal loss can unravel narratives that once felt secure.

Meaning must then be rebuilt—sometimes repeatedly.

What once felt like a stable sense of self begins to feel like a story that must be retold carefully, with edits and explanations, to remain credible. Over time, the effort required to sustain meaning becomes heavier than meaning itself.

Rest That Never Quite Arrives

One of the clearest signs that nothing has settled is the absence of real rest.

People may stop working, but they do not feel rested. They may disconnect briefly, but the underlying tension remains. Time off becomes recovery rather than renewal.

Rest feels undeserved, unsafe, or temporary—something that must be justified or limited. Even moments of quiet carry a subtle pressure to prepare for what comes next.

Stable ground allows rest. Unstable ground does not.

Why This Feels Normal

Many people do not recognize this condition as instability because it has become common.

When constant adjustment is required, adjustment feels normal. When vigilance is expected, vigilance feels responsible. When rest feels risky, exhaustion can even feel mature.

In a world that rewards adaptability, the ability to stay upright under strain is praised. People learn to treat unease as the price of awareness and fatigue as the cost of being thoughtful.

But what is common is not always healthy. And what feels normal is not always sustainable.

Life was not meant to require this much effort just to stand.

The Accumulation of Weight

Instability rarely announces itself all at once. It accumulates.

Small stresses add up. Minor anxieties compound. Guilt resurfaces. Questions about justice linger without resolution. The sense of carrying something uncertain grows heavier over time—not because circumstances necessarily worsen, but because nothing ever absorbs the weight.

Where to Stand Preview

Eventually, many people reach a point of quiet exhaustion. Not collapse, but fatigue. They are tired of managing. Tired of explaining. Tired of holding everything together.

They are tired of standing on something that will not hold still.

Stability That Requires Constant Effort

Much of modern life is organized around adaptability. Flexibility is praised. Fluidity is treated as wisdom. Commitments are kept light. Options are kept open. Identity itself is framed as something to be continually revised.

Beneath this way of thinking is a quiet assumption: if life feels unstable, it is because we have not adapted well enough.

So the solution is always more effort—better strategies, sharper self-awareness, improved control. We are told to recalibrate, reframe, optimize.

But stability that requires constant effort is not stability.

It is balance under strain.

When the ground beneath us is firm, effort produces growth. When the ground is unstable, effort is

Where to Stand Preview

consumed simply staying upright. Energy that might have been spent building a life is spent preventing collapse.

Over time, this produces exhaustion rather than fulfillment.

Many people adjust to this without ever naming it. They lower expectations. They redefine success. They learn not to hope too much. These adjustments can feel wise—even mature—but they often come at a quiet cost: the loss of confidence that life itself can be trusted.

Explanations That Shift Under Weight

Every life rests on explanations.

We rely on ideas—sometimes unexamined ones—to tell us who we are, what matters, and how to make sense of suffering and joy. These explanations form the ground on which we stand.

Some explanations work reasonably well until they are tested. Meaning built on achievement can hold while success lasts, but it weakens under failure. Identity built on self-expression can feel liberating, but it offers little protection when desires conflict or change. Moral systems grounded in consensus work until injustice demands more than agreement.

Where to Stand Preview

The test is not whether an explanation sounds convincing.

It is whether it can bear weight.

Weight comes in many forms: guilt that cannot be dismissed, suffering that cannot be explained away, injustice that demands judgment, love that risks loss. When these pressures arrive, shifting explanations reveal their limits. They rarely collapse all at once. They erode. They soften. They retreat into ambiguity.

What often follows is not disbelief, but improvisation. New explanations are layered over old ones. Language becomes more flexible, less precise. The ground continues to shift, but we learn to move with it.

When Language Loses Its Ground

One of the clearest signs that the ground is shifting is a change in language.

Words that once assumed fixed meaning are replaced with words that allow negotiation. This usually happens quietly—through small adjustments that feel reasonable at the time.

Consider the difference between virtue and value.

Virtue assumes a standard beyond the individual. To speak of virtue is to acknowledge that some things

Where to Stand Preview

are right or wrong regardless of preference. Virtue belongs to solid ground.

Value, by contrast, speaks of relative worth. Values are held, prioritized, revised, and exchanged. Everyone has values. Not everyone recognizes virtue. A culture built on values alone has no stable reference point by which to judge them.

This shift matters. When moral language moves from virtue to value, standards are not denied—they are softened. Judgment is not rejected—it is deferred. Moral seriousness remains, but moral ground erodes.

Missionary Don Richardson once described a culture that admired treachery and deceit. In that society, betrayal was celebrated rather than condemned. By the logic of values alone, such a system is as valid as any other. Only an external standard makes judgment possible.

This is how instability spreads—not through open rejection of morality, but through language that preserves moral feeling while quietly removing moral ground.

What the Ground Cannot Hold

Shifting ground fails in predictable ways.

It cannot sustain justice, because justice requires standards that do not change when they become

Where to Stand Preview

inconvenient. It cannot absorb guilt, because guilt is weight, not feeling—it can be buried for a time, but it resurfaces. It cannot support hope, because hope requires confidence that the future is anchored to something more stable than desire or chance.

When these failures occur, they are often treated as personal shortcomings. People are told to manage expectations, adjust outlooks, or reinterpret the problem. Rarely do we ask whether the ground itself is capable of holding what we ask it to bear.

Sand can absorb effort, but it cannot anchor life. It shifts under pressure. It intrudes into everything. It obscures vision when disturbed. And it resists growth, because nothing can take root where the surface is always moving.

These are not moral accusations.

They are structural realities.

Why Instability Feels Like a Problem

At this point, it is fair to ask: isn't instability simply part of being human?

If it were, we would accept it more easily. But we do not. We experience instability as a problem, not merely an inconvenience. We expect justice to matter. We assume that truth should not change with

Where to Stand Preview

circumstances. We long for permanence even when we deny it.

These expectations are not learned preferences. They are recognitions.

The fact that shifting ground feels wrong is itself evidence that stability is not an illusion. The discomfort points beyond itself. It suggests that the problem is not life, but the foundation on which life is being lived.

The Question Beneath the Questions

This chapter has not asked what you believe.

It has asked what you rely on.

Not whether your explanations are sincere, but whether they can bear weight. Not whether they help you cope, but whether they can sustain meaning, justice, and hope over time.

The question beneath all the others is simple, but not easy:

Where can anyone actually stand?

That question does not yet have an answer here. But it is the right question. And until it is faced honestly, no amount of effort or adjustment will make the ground beneath us settle.

Summary

This chapter has examined the instability many experience in modern life and suggested that the problem may not be internal weakness, but unreliable ground. Explanations that shift under pressure require constant effort, erode moral clarity, and fail to sustain justice, guilt, or hope.

Sand can absorb activity for a time, but it cannot serve as a foundation. When life is lived on shifting ground, nothing fully rests, and growth becomes difficult.

The unease many feel is not a personal failure.

It is a signal—pointing toward a deeper question about whether solid ground exists at all.

That question will guide what follows.

Application: Questions of Ground

1. What explanations do you currently rely on to give your life meaning or stability?
2. When those explanations are tested by failure, injustice, or guilt, do they hold—or do they shift?
3. Which areas of your life require the most effort simply to stay balanced?

Where to Stand Preview

4. Where do you sense instability most clearly: identity, morality, purpose, or hope?
5. Do you experience instability as merely uncomfortable—or as something that feels fundamentally wrong? Why?
6. What would it mean for life to rest on ground that does not move?