

THE Plain Truth

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A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Oct - Dec 2019

What about eternal security?. P. 10

Do you feel inadequate? P. 14

God is relationship. P. 18

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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Break Barriers, Build Bridges

We are good at putting people into groups and calling one group better than another. We segregate people by gender, age group, race, colour, religion, economic and social status. In this way, we consciously or unconsciously erect barriers and divide people.

This has produced unhealthy relationships - gender, age and racial discriminations, social and economic divides, racial and religious tensions, conflicts between communities. We see this everywhere throughout the world.

God created diversity - males and females, whites, blacks and browns, different features - for beauty, celebration, and building relationship with one another. God did not make one group superior to another. All humans are equally valuable and worthy, each with their distinctive, unique attributes. These differences are for building and enriching relationships.

To this end, God commands people everywhere to break barriers and build bridges, forge and foster healthy, loving relationships. That's a very tall order, given our individual, cultural biases and prejudices towards one another.

To fulfil God's purpose for us requires radical change of heart, mind, and soul. We cannot generate peace, unity and harmony by own effort and willpower. We can only do so by God's transforming power through the Holy Spirit. Thank God, through Jesus, God has sent us his Spirit to help us break barriers and build bridges.

Jesus broke barriers and built bridges

Jesus entered our hostile world, broke barriers and built bridges. He mixed freely with all segments of society - women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, beggars, Jews and Gentiles. He showed love, mercy, kindness, compassion, empathy. He healed the sick, the lame, blind, deaf, demon-possessed, invalids. He broke established norms, customs and traditions. He showed how to love people and be at peace with each other (even our enemies).

God took the initiative to love us, forgive us, reconcile us, and adopt us as his children. Jesus, through his incarnate life, death, resurrection and ascension, forged our eternal union with God. After ascending into heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit to help us break barriers, build bridges, and pursue peace. Jesus showed us the way. Indeed, he is the Way.

The risen and glorified Jesus *is* our perfect humanity. He *is* our life, our righteousness, our hope, our all. He invites us to come and participate in his creative works.

Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus commanded his disciples to go into all nations, preach the gospel, and make disciples.¹

That's God's mission for his Church, then and now.



By
Dr. P. Sellappan

Disciples broke barriers and built bridges

On the Day of Pentecost in AD 31, Apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preached the gospel (of peace, unity) to representatives hailing from many nations and tongues.² That was the beginning. Soon, the disciples went everywhere preaching the gospel and making disciples. The Holy Spirit instructed Philip to explain the gospel to a high-ranking Ethiopian eunuch. He got baptised.³ The Spirit sent Peter to Cornelius (a gentile) and his entire household heard the gospel and was baptised.⁴ The Spirit sent Peter to the Jews, and Paul to the gentiles.⁵ Since then the disciples have been going everywhere preaching the gospel of peace and unity with God and with fellowman.

Church is breaking barriers and building bridges

Jesus broke barriers and built bridges. He united both Jews and Gentiles, that is, all people. Jesus is our peace.⁶ He now commands his followers to do likewise.

That is Jesus' mandate for his Church today. He has raised many churches, pastors and elders to go and preach the gospel everywhere - breaking barriers, building bridges, showing kindness, ministering and serving people. Millions are coming to know the true God and their true selves in Christ. They are seeing all people as God's children - brothers and sisters, belonging to the one household of God,⁷ not as strangers, aliens, and enemies.

Unity in diversity

God created diversity for beauty, relationship and community. He has given each of us unique gifts and talents to build and enrich each other.⁸ So, each of us have a unique contribution to make that no one else can.

Unity and uniformity are different. *Uniformity* means everyone conforming and acting the same way, having similar physical, mental and emotional makeup. *Unity* on the hand is about embracing our individual differences, doing things together, and bringing out the best in each of us. Uniformity is utterly boring, but unity with diversity has great value - it builds relationships and enriches life. So, let's celebrate unity with diversity.

God loves all nations and peoples and tongues. He wants us to break barriers, build bridges, live in peace, unity and harmony, live as brothers and sisters.

The triune God is the template for all relationships. God created us in his image and likeness to mirror/reflect him. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though distinct from each other, are totally united and operate as one. They represent true unity with diversity. May we behold and reflect him in ever increasing measure. □

¹ Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:8

² Acts 2:1-11

³ Acts 8:26-40

⁴ Acts 10:9-48

⁵ Galatians 2:8

⁶ Ephesians 2:14

⁷ Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:19

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:1-14

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What our readers say:

Editor's notes:

1. *Greetings brothers and sisters! Trust 2019 has been a fruitful year and you have been growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. Even if your experience was challenging and turbulent, fear not! The Gospel is always Good News. It is the best news ever - it is Good News for all people, in all nations and in all ages! Thank God, it doesn't depend on our abilities, talents, goodness or righteousness! God in Christ by his Spirit has reconciled you, forgiven you, justified you, accepted you, qualified you, and adopted you into his family. Indeed, he has glorified and seated you at the right hand of God! More than that, the risen Christ joyfully shares with you all things: his everlasting, glorious life, and all that he has created (and creating), that is, the vast universe!*

This Good News is none other than the risen Christ dwelling in you by his Spirit! The Gospel is no longer a mystery! Awakening to this truth/reality will help you to participate in his endless life of peace, joy, freedom, passion, fulfilment and dreams. God is calling you to receive this precious gift of life because he loves you! God wants you to experience his kind of life!

Yes, you can discover this and other precious truths right here, right in the pages of the Plain Truth magazine! You can download the magazine (including past issues) from www.gci-malaysia.org or request for a free subscription by sending your name and address to ptasiamy@gmail.com

Grace and peace to you from the Christ in you!

2. *As we conclude 2019 and enter 2020, we would greatly appreciate if you could give us your comments, feedbacks, reviews to help us improve the quality of the magazine (ptasiamy@gmail.com)*

3. *Thank you for your support and participation in this ministry - your prayers, contributions and sharing the gospel are greatly appreciated. Please continue to pray for us even as we pray for you.*

The Plain Truth guides me and directs my life.

Yap Yin Chong **Johor Bahru**

The Plain Truth gives spiritual guidance as well as practical advice to us readers. My late parents embraced Christianity at a very old age after their retirement from government service. The gospel gave them

peace of mind until their departure from this world.

Quah Steven **Kuala Lumpur**

The articles are simply great, informative and encouraging.

Choong Yew Min **Klang**

The Plain Truth is informative and uplifting. The articles strengthen my faith and gives me great courage and hope.

Evelin Teh **Petaling Jaya**

The Plain Truth gives me a deeper understanding about life - its ups and downs, and the way forward in Christ Jesus. Thank you!

Reader **Singapore**

Thank you for sending me your free magazine. I always enjoy the mix of articles in each issue. Keep this good spiritual food coming. And keep up the good work!

Reader **Gombak, Selangor.**

What a magazine that is filled with so many profound ideas. How can you afford sending such a quality magazine free to so many people every issue? I love the magazine and thank you for your generosity.

Anonymous **Selangor**

I enjoy reading The Plain Truth very much. The articles are interesting, touching and encouraging.

Terri Ng **Singapore**

The Plain Truth keeps me focused as I go about my daily life and put my faith in God.

Lim Chin Poh **Kuala Trengganu**

The Plain Truth articles are informative and interesting and my bible knowledge has increased.

Leonard Gomes **Kuala Lumpur**

The Plain Truth gives me spiritual guidance and peace of mind.

Randy Wee **Singapore**

The Plain Truth surely is a magazine of

Christian understanding. We are confused and find it hard to understand why there is so much suffering in this world. The articles explain in great detail why this is so, and in the process, we learn about God's great love for us, His children.

Boey Chee Ho **Penang**

After all these years you still remember to send me the magazine. That's simply fantastic! Needless to say, your magazine is most lively and spiritually enlightening. I enclose a token sum that the good work may continue to be done.

Albert Ng **Alor Star**

The Plain Truth articles give new perspectives and help me grow in my bible knowledge. I appreciate the entire team for their dedication and hard work.

Rajagopal Doraisamy **Teluk Intan**

Wish the Plain Truth Ministry team: "A Joy-filled Christmas" and "Happy and Exciting 2020".

Jayashree

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Jesus Shares Our Humanity

During this Christmas season our focus turns to the miracle of the incarnation and birth of Jesus. Luke gives us a glimpse of the early life of Jesus as a new born, infant and adolescent.¹ In doing so he intends to help us understand how Jesus shared our humanity at each stage of his development as a human being. He wants us to see how Jesus beat back our fallen human nature, overcoming the temptations we face. At every point, Jesus (in his vicarious humanity, by the power of the Spirit) was re-creating our humanity. As God incarnate (sharing our flesh), Jesus not only is with us, but is radically *one of us* and for us. *Joy to the world—the Lord is come!*

Let's focus on what Luke tells us about the new born baby Jesus. He shows how the eternal Son of God came into the world of his creation, becoming human in the most humble and helpless way—born in a stable, then placed in an animal's feeding trough.

Jesus' birth draws Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem

Luke tells us:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Caesar was ruling, but God was in charge—now using Caesar's edict to move Mary and Joseph 80 miles from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. When Rome took a census every 14 years, every Jewish male had to return to the city of their fathers and there record their name, occupation, property and family of origin.

When Mary says, "Let it be to me according to Your word,"² little did she know what was in store for her as God went about fulfilling the many prophecies concerning the promised Messiah, including that he would be human, Jewish, of the line of David, and born to a virgin in the village of Bethlehem, David's town.³

Bethlehem, which means "house of bread," was the ideal birthplace for the Bread of Life. Its rich historic heritage included the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin,⁴ the marriage of Ruth, and the exploits of David. This ordinary scene thus speaks of God's mighty hand.

Mary's journey to Bethlehem must have been exhausting. Nevertheless, she rejoiced in doing God's will, and, no doubt, was glad to get away from the gossip-mongers in Nazareth.

By Grace
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Jesus' birth draws the angels from heaven

Luke continues:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Think of it—the Creator of the vast cosmos, born as a lowly creature. The eternal Word of God has become a speechless baby! The angels announced this stunning event first to the lowliest of the lows—shepherds. How ironic! Shepherds were outcasts—not even allowed to testify in court. Luke's point is clear: God cares about the poor and lowly. Moreover, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and the Lamb of God sacrificed for ALL humanity. Luke is emphasizing that the gospel is good news for everyone. All are included!

"Do not be afraid" is a key theme in Luke's Gospel. Literally the angel says, "I announce to you good news, a great joy which shall be to all the people." He uses the Greek word that means "preach the good news," a word Luke uses often in his Gospel and in the book of Acts, which he also wrote. What is this good news? That God has sent a Savior to meet the greatest need of all people—that need here described as *peace*. The Jewish word *shalom* (peace) means much more than the absence of war. It means well-being, health, prosperity, security, soundness, and completeness. It is more with inner character than outward circumstance.



Continues on page 9

Participants in Christ's Ministry

The people of God had been anticipating the Messiah for a long time, but they were not prepared for what actually occurred. None of the Old-Testament prophets (Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) had provided the full picture of what was to come. But then came John the son of Zechariah—we know him as John the Baptist. His prophetic ministry was unique in its scope and detail in announcing the Messiah.

As we enter Advent Season, we will focus on the important ministry of John the Baptist in preparing the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. We will also draw a parallel with how God has invited us to also be participants in preparing the way for our Lord and Savior.

The picture we get from the Advent Season is almost like looking in a mirror and seeing a reverse image: we are presented with a picture of the ministry of the Father, Son, and Spirit flowing in reverse from Jesus Christ's second coming to his first coming. The passages in Luke 3:1-6, Philippians 1:3-11 and Malachi 3:1-4 portray the anticipation and participation in ministry that we are given as we await our Lord's return.

John the Baptist's ministry of preparation

God sent Gabriel from his side in heaven to tell Zechariah the priest about the forthcoming birth of a son to be named John. Gabriel announced that John would "bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:16-17). After the baby was born, Zechariah, led by the Spirit, spoke these words:

You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.¹

What a special ministry was predicted for John! Let's look now at today's Gospel reading to see what John did and how he did it. Luke gives us a historical marker of when John served:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracónitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.²

Roman and Jewish historical records place this event at AD 27 or 28. Although John had been appointed some 30 years earlier, God set a specific time in history for his important ministry to begin. The time had now arrived. The Father was soon to send his Son, Jesus, to begin his history-changing, world-saving work, so he led John to begin his participatory, preparatory ministry:

He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

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*'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.'*³

According to Luke 1:80, John "grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel." After spending the early years of his life in a small town in Judea's hill country, John moved to the deserted area east of Jerusalem. Zechariah and Elizabeth had raised him as instructed, taught him the Hebrew Scriptures, and shared with him the prophetic messages about his future ministry. John grew and became strong in the Spirit. When God called him to start his ministry, he left the desert and began preaching a message of repentance in preparation for the forthcoming ministry of Jesus.

John had to leave his familiar, though solitary, home to go where he could work to restore a God-consciousness in the Jewish people of his day. After years of being dominated by foreign empires, the public mindset had become secularized with personal survival being the highest priority. Although the Jews continued to have routine religious activities, the word of God was not guiding their daily living. John called on his Jewish kinsmen to repent—to turn back to God—and he followed up with the rite of baptism. The area around the Jordan River was an appropriate setting for those who left their cities and towns to listen as John, a gifted preacher, reminded them of their roots as the people of God. The baptism in water dramatized their cleansing through God's gracious forgiveness.

Isaiah's poetic words related to John's calling predicted a prophet powerfully calling on people to change their ways so that they would be responsive to the saving ministry of the Messiah, God's Son. John was not seeking his own following—he understood that his role was to point the people to Jesus, not to himself. His ministry drew people's attention to the Messiah who was to appear very soon.

One of the highlights of John's ministry was to participate in Jesus' baptism—a baptism not necessary for Jesus (who had not sinned), but necessary for all of us. Even today, believers continue to participate in that baptism as a sign of their repentance and faith.

As abruptly as John's ministry at the Jordan began, it ended with his arrest. Herod "locked John up in prison."⁴ He did not enjoy the pleasure of carrying on his ministry into old age. In fact, his ministry lasted for no more than a year or two. Behind prison walls, John could not rejoice in seeing the results of his work of service.

John was a special prophet, foretold in Scripture, and honored to prepare for the Messiah. No greater prophetic work was ever done before him, and yet it was cut short of any immediate rewarding celebration. This combination: privileged calling, yet unfulfilled ultimate results, may seem somewhat conflicting. What lessons can we learn from John's experience? What similarities do we find in the ministry of the church?

The church's similar ministry

The *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* says this concerning Luke's account of John the Baptist:

Luke raises up John as a model for his churches. They, too, prepare for Messiah Jesus and are not the Messiah. They, too, are the pioneers leading others to the frontiers of faith in Jesus. Whenever John's story is preached as part of the good news, they are challenged to repent, so that they, too, may be prepared for the advent of the Lord Jesus.

As modern readers of the Gospels, it's easy to overlook this connection. The profound truth is that just as John the Baptist participated in Jesus Christ's ministry, preparing people to receive Jesus, so has the ministry of the church participated for the past 1900+ years—and that includes this congregation today.

We were designated before creation and have been called now to participate. We cannot fulfill this ministry inside the walls of our Sunday gathering places any more than John could fulfill his ministry without leaving his familiar home and going to the Jordan River. Our calling is part of an awesome work, and yet, like John, we often serve without the opportunity to enjoy the end results.

Let's consider another of today's readings, which enlarges on this role of participation: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*⁵

The apostle Paul considered the members of the church at Philippi his partners in ministry. Their involvement started when Paul first evangelized the city more than 10 years before he wrote this letter from prison. Over the years that transpired, they had actively continued that participation.

For those of us who wonder if our small congregation can make a difference, let me share what the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* says in summary concerning the church at Philippi:

[It] apparently was first housed in Lydia's home. In spite of its small beginnings, it grew and became an active Christian community, taking an important part in evangelism, readily sharing its own material possessions, even out of deep poverty, and generously sending one of its own people to assist Paul in his work and to aid him when he was in prison.

The members of the church at Philippi were not apostles. Most of them were not even preachers. But, together, they all participated in the ways that they were gifted by the Holy Spirit. They faithfully fulfilled their calling and mission to make disciples, modeling faithfulness in that mission for other churches. Though their part in this high calling was not always pleasurable, it was always powerful and spiritually rewarding. Paul's letter to them came from a prison cell. Their emissary to Paul, Epaphroditus, in carrying out his appointed task to visit Paul, almost died for the work of Christ.⁶ The congregation experienced both joy and sorrow as they joined Jesus in ministry. Many of the churches of that time—just like today—experienced internal problems, which we read about in some of Paul's letters.



Paul referred to himself and Timothy as "servants of Jesus Christ" in the opening words of his letter to the church at Philippi. That is who we are as well—servants who partner with Jesus to fulfill his mission. In other words, the members of the church at Philippi, in partnering with Paul in ministry, were participants in Christ's ministry. From the city of Philippi, they reached out, sharing the gospel, serving the poor

and supporting Paul as they reached far beyond their city limits in the work of Jesus.

Our participation

As we proceed through this Advent Season, going in reverse from the second coming of Jesus toward his first coming, we are wise to consider the stage of Christ's ministry in which we find ourselves today. Ours is a ministry of *participation* with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist prepared the Jewish people for Jesus' ministry. Paul likewise ministered to both Jews and Gentiles, and many of them partnered with him. Today, we follow in the footsteps of these outstanding examples as we participate with Jesus, as he comes to us by the Spirit, in his ongoing ministry to the world. □

¹ Luke 1:76-77

² Luke 3:1-2

³ Luke 3:3-6

⁴ Luke 3:20

⁵ Philippians 1:3-4

⁶ Philippians 2:30

The First Church Christmas

“Joy to the world!” Christians look forward to a joyous Christmas season each year. Yet, surprisingly, for the first 300 years of the church’s life there was no Christmas celebration of Jesus’ birth. Possible reasons include:

- The apostolic church had expected that Christ’s coming in glory was just around the corner and its worship pointed to the future instead of the past.
- The church’s primary focus was on Christ’s death and resurrection and his presence through the Spirit, which were celebrated during Easter and Pentecost.
- Epiphany, or “manifestation,” another early church festival, afforded a remembrance of Jesus’ Incarnation and birth.
- There was no corresponding Old Testament festival from which Christmas could emerge, as there had been for Pasha or Easter (Jewish Passover) and the Christian Pentecost (Feast of Weeks).
- The date of Jesus’ birthday was, perhaps, not known.

First Christmas at Rome

In A.D. 336 the church at Rome proclaimed December 25 as the *dies natalis Christi*, “the birthday of Christ.” An entry in the Chronograph of A.D. 354 (also called Philocalian Calendar) records, “Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the eighth before the calends of January,” or December 25. It doesn’t state that Christmas was being observed on that date, but it is likely that the observance began at Rome around this time.

A generation after the Chronograph was published, church father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote that Rome was celebrating a December 25th Christmas: “On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathens were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed.”

The “profane ceremonies” referred to by Chrysostom centered around the birthday of the “Invincible Sun,” or Sol, which was also celebrated on December 25, the day of the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar. The cult of the Sun was of grave concern to the church at Rome. It was introduced in A.D. 218 when Elagabalus (c. 203-222) became emperor of the Roman Empire. Elagabalus venerated the Sun god and introduced his cult into Rome under the title *deus Sol invictus*, that is, the invincible, undefeated or unconquered sun god.

By Paul Kroll

Emperor Aurelian, Roman emperor from A.D. 270 to 275, decreed the Unconquered Sun as supreme god of the Roman Empire. Mithra, a god of Persian origin, was part of the Sun cult worship. Mithra’s birthday was also on December 25. The Roman Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, who ruled prior to Constantine the Great (306-337), venerated the Sol Mithras Deus invictus cult. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was a devotee of the Sun cult before his conversion.

Struggle against sun worship

A December 25th birthday celebration for Christ served to compete with and counteract the festival of the pagan devotees of Sol-Mithra. The church was able to challenge the worshippers of Sol Invictus with Jesus Christ, whom they proclaimed as the true Son of God and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 1:13, 16).

Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol. It also provided church members with a safe, Christ-centered worship alternative to other heathen festivals, such as the late December Saturnalia. Simultaneously, the Roman church could promote prayerful and moral behavior, in sharp contrast to the licentiousness that accompanied the pagan festivals.

Celebration of Christmas (or Advent, a term referring to Christ’s coming) also was effective in combating heresies about Jesus, pointing to his incarnation as a real human being.

It’s not surprising that the December 25th Christmas celebration quickly spread from the congregations in Rome to churches throughout the empire. From the fourth century on, every Western calendar assigns Christmas to December 25. By the middle of the fifth century, most of the Eastern churches had adopted the Christmas festival, although on January 6, and by the time of Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430),

Christmas is everywhere established in Christendom.

Over the next thousand years, Christmas observance followed the expanding community of Christianity around the world. Today Advent/Christmas is one of the church’s most important worship seasons. □



What's in Your Backpack?

Our trip to a conference in October 2018 lasted 20 hours with several stopovers. Upon arrival, we were in a rush to get through the airport.

As we hurriedly emptied our pockets and removed our bags for security, my backpack passed through the X-ray machine, but something was detected so it was stopped and brought back. The staff motioned for me to bring it over for inspection and asked me, "What's in your backpack?" As it turned out, it was an unsuspecting stapler that caused the delay.

With life often compared to a journey, it would be good to regularly evaluate what we carry with us. What is in our "backpack" says something about our values, priorities, and aspirations. There may be things that should be there but aren't. At times, we may be carrying things that are nice to have, but not really necessary. We may also be unsuspectingly taking along things that delay us by distracting us or weighing us down.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us..." (Hebrews 12:1).

We can be weighed down by physical baggage, in terms of too much dependence on people or material things. It can be emotional baggage – like resentment, discontent, envy, and insecurity. It could be spiritual baggage – like guilt, legalism, self-righteousness, or

sinful habits we refuse to confront. Sometimes these are clearly evident to us.

Allow God to search our heart and detect what does not belong there. What are the things we should not leave and live without? In this journey, let us make room for what matters – the joy of salvation, hope for the kingdom, boldness for the gospel, and passion for God and for the people he has called us to love. □

By Dr Eugene Guzon



Continued from page 5

Life was difficult. Taxes and unemployment were high, and morals were slipping lower. Roman law, Greek philosophy, and even the religion of Israel under the Law of Moses could not bring the shalom of God to anyone's heart. So, God sent his Son. And the angels shouted in praise. They had done so at creation,⁵ and now they do so as God commences a stunning re-creation in and through Jesus, the Creator of the cosmos now clothed in our humanity.

The purpose of the re-creation is to unite all humankind with God's "glory." That glory once dwelt in the tabernacle, then the temple, but it had departed because of Israel's continuing sin. Now God's glory has returned in the person of Jesus—God in flesh. Now the "holy of holies" containing God's presence is a human baby lying in a lowly manger. Glory to God!

Jesus' birth draws shepherds from the fields

Luke continues:

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the

word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The shepherds knew what to look for: a new born baby lying in a manger. When they found the baby, they worshiped him and marveled at God's grace and goodness and the miracle he had done for them.

Our response

The shepherds, as common people, are models for us today. They received by faith and then responded in obedience to the message God sent. After finding the baby, they shared the good news of what they had encountered with others. In doing so, they glorified and praised God. Then they humbly returned to their duties, new men going back to their life's vocation. Though they were mere shepherds, God used them to be the first humans to testify to the arrival of the promised Messiah. May we follow their example by living and sharing the good news in our ordinary, everyday lives. Merry Christmas! Christ has come. □

¹ Luke 2:1-20
² Luke 1:38
³ Genesis 3:15, 49:10;
2 Samuel 7:1-17;
Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2
⁴ Genesis 35:16-20
⁵ Job 38:7

What About “Eternal Security”?

The doctrine of eternal security in theological language is referred to as the “perseverance of the saints.” In common expression it is referred to as “once saved, always saved” or “once a Christian, always a Christian.”

Many Scriptures give us an assurance that we have salvation now, even though we must await the resurrection to inherit, in finality, eternal life and the kingdom of God. Here are some phrases the New Testament uses:

- He who believes has eternal life (John 6:47).
- Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).
- I [Jesus] give them eternal life, and they shall never perish: no one can snatch them out of my hand (John 10:28)
- There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).
- Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).
- [Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).
- [Christ] will keep you strong to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8).
- God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion (Philippians 1:6).
- We have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14).

It is upon such assurances that the doctrine of eternal security is built. However, there is another side to the coin of salvation. There also appear to be warnings that Christians can fall from the grace of God.

Christians are warned, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”¹ Jesus said, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation”² and “the love of most will grow cold.”³ The apostle Paul said some in the church had “shipwrecked their faith.”⁴ The church at Ephesus was warned that Christ might remove its lampstand and he would vomit the lukewarm Laodiceans from his mouth. Most fearful is the admonition in Hebrews 10:26-31:

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have

By Paul Kroll

received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.”

There is also Hebrews 6:4-6 to think about:

“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

There is a duality, then, in the New Testament. Many verses are positive about the eternal salvation that we have in Christ. This salvation seems secure. But such verses are tempered by some warnings that appear to say Christians can lose their salvation through persistent unbelief.

Since the question of eternal security or whether Christians are safe—that is, when once saved, whether they are always saved—usually comes up because of such scriptures as Hebrews 10:26-31, let’s look at this passage in more detail. The question is how to interpret these verses. To whom is the writer talking, and what is the nature of the people’s “belief” and what have they accepted?

Let’s first look at what Hebrews as a whole tells us. The point of this book is the need for *belief in Christ* as the *totally* sufficient sacrifice for sins. There are no competitors. Faith must rest in him alone. The solution to the question of the possible loss of salvation generated by verse 26 lies in the last verse of the chapter: “We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed [or, lost], but of those who believe [or, have faith] and are saved.” Some



shrink back and are lost, but those who remain in Christ cannot be lost.

This same assurance to the faithful is also found in the verses prior to Hebrews 10:26. Christians have confidence to be in God's presence by the blood of Jesus. We can draw near to God with full assurance of faith. The writer exhorts Christians with these words: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

One way to understand the verses in Hebrews 6 and 10 about "falling away" is to see the writer as giving his readers *hypothetical* scenarios to encourage them to remain steadfast in the faith. Let's look at Hebrews 10:19-39, for example. The people to whom he is talking "have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place" through Christ. They are able to "draw near to God." The writer sees these people as holding "unswervingly to the hope we profess." He wants to spur them on to even greater love and faith.

As part of his encouragement, he paints a picture of what could happen—hypothetically according to the above theory—to those who "deliberately keep on sinning." Nonetheless, the people he is addressing are people who "had received the light" and "stood their ground" during days of persecution. They have their "confidence" in Christ, and the writer encourages them to persevere in the faith. Finally, he says of the people to whom he is writing that "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

Notice, also, how the writer closes his warning about "falling away" in Hebrews 6:1-8. He says: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of *better things* in your case—things that *accompany* salvation. God is not unjust; he will *not forget* your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them." The writer then goes on to tell them he has said these things so that they will show the "same diligence to the very end."

Hypothetically, then, it is possible to speak of a situation in which a person who truly had faith in Christ could lose it. But if it were not possible, would the warning be appropriate or effective?

In the real world, can Christians lose their faith? Christians can "fall" in the sense of committing sins.⁵ They can become spiritually lazy in certain situations. But does this sometimes result in a final "falling away" for those who are truly in Christ? This is not wholly clear from Scripture. In fact, we might ask how one can "truly" be in Christ and yet be capable of simultaneously "falling away"?

The church's position is that no one can snatch people out of Christ's hand. If a person's faith remains in Christ, he or she cannot be lost. As long as Christians hold fast to this confession of their hope, their salvation is safe.

The question about the "once saved, always saved" doctrine has to do with whether we can lose our faith in Christ. As mentioned earlier, the book of Hebrews seems to describe people who have at least an initial "faith" but who can be in danger of losing it. Yet, that proves the point made in the previous paragraph. The only way to lose salvation is to discard the only Way to salvation: faith in Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews is primarily about the sin of unbelief in God's saving work, which he accomplished in Jesus Christ. Hebrews chapter 10 gets into the question dramatically with verse 19, stating that we have confidence and full assurance through Jesus Christ.

Verse 23 exhorts us to hold fast to our confession. We know this for certain: As long as we hold fast the confession of our hope, we are fully secure and cannot lose our salvation. This confession includes our faith in Christ's atonement for our sins, our hope of new life in him and our continuing allegiance to him in this life.

Often, those who use the slogan "once saved always saved" are not clear about what they mean. The phrase does *not* mean that a person has been saved merely because he or she said few words about Christ. Human beings are saved when they have the Holy Spirit, having been born again to a new life in Christ. Real faith is evidenced by allegiance to Christ, and that means we no longer live for self, but for the Saviour.

The bottom line is, we are safe in Christ as long as we continue to live in Jesus.⁶ We have full assurance of faith in him, because it is he who saves us. We don't have to worry, "Am I going to make it?" In Christ we have assurance—we are his and are saved, and nothing can snatch us out of his hand.

The only way we could be lost is to spurn his blood, deciding we really don't need him after all and that we are sufficient to ourselves. If we did that, we wouldn't really care about being saved anyway. As long as we remain faithful in Christ, we have assurance that he will complete the work he has begun in us.

The comforting thing is: We do not have to worry about our salvation, saying, "What if I fail? What if I fail?" We have already failed. Jesus is the one who saves us, and he doesn't fail. Can we fail to accept him? Yes, but if we are Spirit-led Christians we haven't failed to accept him. Once we accept Jesus, the Holy Spirit lives in us, conforming us to his image. We have joy, not fear. We have peace, not anxiety.

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we stop worrying about whether we'll "make it." He "made it" for us. We rest in him. We quit worrying. We have faith and trust in him, not in ourselves. So the question of whether we can lose our salvation no longer bothers us. Why? Because we believe Jesus' work on the cross and his resurrection is all we need.

God doesn't need our perfection. We need his, and he has given it to us as his free gift through faith in Christ. We won't fail, because our salvation doesn't depend on us.

To summarize, the church believes that those who *remain* in Christ cannot be lost. They are "eternally secure." But this depends on what people mean when they say, "once saved, always saved."

As far as the related doctrine of predestination is concerned, we can summarize the church's position in a few words. We do not believe that God has decreed before all-time who will and will not be lost. It is the church's belief that God will make fair and just provision for people who did not receive the gospel in this life. Such people will be judged on the same basis as we are, that is, on whether they give their allegiance and faith to Jesus Christ.□

¹ 1 Corinthians 10:12

² Mark 14:38

³ Matthew 24:12

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:19

⁵ 1 John 1:8-2:2

⁶ Hebrews 10:19-23

Our union

Do we exist by ourselves, for ourselves? Or are we connected to God for a higher, noble, divine purpose?

We are connected to God

God created us in his *image and likeness*.¹ Why...so he might adopt us as his children.² As children of God, we are to imitate, reflect, mirror him. He desires that we participate in his divine nature and creative works.

We cannot exist by ourselves! We don't have a separate, independent existence. We can only exist in relationship with God who created us. We draw our every breath from God - he keeps us alive and ticking! God created us (and all things) *by Christ and for Christ*.³

As God's children, we are to reflect/mirror God. To make that possible, he put mirror neurons in our brain. Exercising these mirror neurons with the Spirit's help will help us mirror God more fully. Yes, God wants us to live his abundant life, his quality of life!

Unfortunately, because of our sin (spiritual blindness), we reflect God poorly. Consequently, we live low quality, mediocre lives. God hates to see us live this kind of life. He created us to live an abundant life. Let's wake up to this reality!

Sin didn't separate us from God

Sin *never* alienated or separated us from God. God did *not* alienate himself from us because of our sin. Remember, God reached out to Adam and Eve after they had sinned and were hiding in the bushes! Jesus entered our broken, sinful world, and reached out to us. He did not alienate himself from us.

The *perceived* alienation is only in our *minds*. Apostle Paul makes it clear, "And you, who once were alienated and enemies *in your mind* by wicked works, yet now He *has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy*, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight."⁴

We have assumed falsely that our sin alienated us from God. True, we may have *alienated ourselves from God*, but *God never alienated himself from us*. The alienation is from *our* side, not from God's side.

We were spiritually blind

Sin, our *twisted desire*, blurred our perception of God. Adam and Eve, in their twisted thinking, perceived (wrongly) that God was withholding something that was good and desirable from them, that is, the fruit of the Tree of knowledge of good and evil. They perceived God didn't want them to partake of this fruit and become *wise and immortal* like God!⁵ They perceived they were not like God [yet] but taking the fruit would make them wise and immortal like God (which was not the case as God created them in his image and likeness). So, they went for the fruit!

Their mistrust in God began humanity's downward spiral (slide). Instead of reflecting God's loving and self-giving nature, we reflect the gods of our imagination (stingy, distant, hard, legalistic and judgemental gods),



By
Dr. P. Sellappan

and each other's confused, twisted desire. We feel inadequate, incomplete, and lack being like God. So, we scheme, plot, fight, kill and steal what belongs to others. We coerce, control, manipulate and grab what belongs to others. We scapegoat (blame) others for our own sins, failures and shortcomings. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent (metaphor for twisted thinking). You can see the scapegoating and blame game in politics, workplaces, communities, and even families.

We break the tenth commandment which says, "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."⁶

Our collective twisted desire, sin and failure has brought our downward spiral. Paul puts it this way:



"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."⁷

"...God has bound everyone over to *disobedience* so that he may have mercy on them all."⁸

Jesus forged our eternal union with God

Taking on human form, Jesus entered our fallen, sinful world, and from there, he rescued us from sin, confusion and spiritual blindness, and opened our minds to help us see the true God (who God really is), and our true ourselves (who we really are).

Jesus Christ was (and is) fully God and fully man (human). He represents both God and humanity. As *God*, he poured out his life for humanity – he loved us, served us, forgave our sin, showed us mercy, kindness, compassion. He showed what God (the Father) is like.

with God

As *man*, he loved God, trusted God, obeyed God, fully surrendered to God. Thus, Jesus represents both God and man perfectly. He is the perfect God-man. As God-man, Jesus is the bridge between God and man, between heaven and earth.

Jesus assumed our sinful nature (but without sinning) and overcame it through blood, sweat and tears throughout his 33 years of life on earth. He *recreated* our fallen nature to his holy, blameless nature. He did this through his incarnate life, death, resurrection and ascension. He lived vicariously on our behalf, in our place. As the last Adam, he represented us from birth to death to resurrection to ascension. That is how he secured salvation for us. He is our salvation. His life is our life. His is our righteousness. His standing with God is our standing with God. Jesus forged our eternal union with God. That is how we can have access to God.



After ascending into heaven, Jesus sent us his Holy Spirit to help us live our new life in him more fully. All this is by grace; we did nothing to merit or earn it.

Through Jesus' incarnation, God has adopted us as his children – as his sons and daughters. He now invites us to come and participate in his dynamic, resurrected glorious humanity. That's the purpose he created us for. Indeed, God has chosen not to be God without us. Jesus will always remain human (but without ceasing to be God), representing, mediating and interceding for us.

Our eternal inheritance

We are God's children now (even though we don't see it clearly).⁹ As God's children, Jesus shares with us his

risen and glorified life, his intimate relationship with the Father in the Spirit, and his vast creation. Wow, that's everything!

Talking about this inheritance, Paul tells us:

"We are now heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ."¹⁰

"In [Christ] we have obtained an *inheritance*, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."¹¹

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."¹²

Yes, God has given all power and all things to Jesus, and Jesus shares the same all with us.

Jesus calls us to participate in his glorified humanity

Having forged eternal union with God through his incarnate life, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus has sent us the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to renew our mind, to transform us, to help us participate in his risen, glorified humanity, and in his creative works.

The Holy Spirit empowers us to reflect God more fully – helps us to love, share, forgive, show kindness and mercy. The Spirit helps us to break barriers and build bridges. The Spirit helps us to love even our enemies and do good to them. That's the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit.

At resurrection, we, like Jesus, will have a glorified body that is not subject to aging, sickness and death. We will have God's nature. We will have no desire to sin, manipulate, or control people. We will see others as brothers and sisters. In short, we will be reflecting God's nature. But we don't have to wait! That process starts with each of us right here, right now!

God is a self-giving God. The Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - give themselves to each other fully (withholding nothing) and receive from each other fully. They empty into each other, and in doing so, get filled from each other (like a two-way electrical circuit). That is how the Triune God operates. He is the template for all creation, how everything in the universe is supposed to operate.

Jesus, through his incarnation, has forged our eternal union with God. *He has united God with us, and us with God.* We have an eternal relationship with God right now, right here. Jesus is now calling people everywhere to come and participate in his abundant and glorious life. Let's thank God and accept his awesome invitation! □

¹ Genesis 1:26

² Ephesians 1:5;
Galatians 4:5

³ Colossians 1:15

⁴ Colossians 1:21-22

⁵ Genesis 3:1-6

⁶ Deuteronomy 5:21;
Exodus 20:17

⁷ Romans 3:23

⁸ Romans 11:32

⁹ 1 John 3:1

¹⁰ Romans 8:17

¹¹ Ephesians 1:11

¹² 1 Peter 1:3-4

Do you feel inadequate?

Scripture instructs us on how to live a pleasant and abundant Christian life. However, some of these guidelines call us out of our comfort zones. For example, Jesus tells us to love our neighbors and even our enemies, to explain the Gospel to others, and at times other duties we may find difficult. I didn't feel love for a neighbor who tossed a dead animal into our yard, and as an introvert I was terrified when asked to speak to a large group. But I survived.

As Christians we will at times be prompted by the Holy Spirit to do something beyond what we feel comfortable performing. Scripture tells of individuals, like you and me, who were overwhelmed with the duties that God laid on them. When the Lord told Moses to confront Pharaoh, he balked, saying, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?"¹ It seemed impossible. Likewise, Gideon felt unworthy and unable to free Israel from enemy invasion.² Jeremiah, when called to be a prophet, responded that he was too young and unable to speak fluently.³

Likewise, we may feel inadequate when we sense God's bidding to fulfill certain tasks. The fact is, we ARE inadequate of ourselves, and God knows it! "...for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."⁴ His understanding of human weakness is expressed in the Lord's message to the church in Philadelphia, "I know your deeds; See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. *I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.*"⁵ The Lord called them to action, in spite of their weakness.

Even Jesus speaking from his humanity said, "I can of my own self do nothing."⁶

Why does God call us out of our comfort zones?

When God prompts you or me to do something uncomfortable to us, we may balk—"Lord, do you *really* want me to do *that*?" In these rimes, let's remember he formed us to be his agents of doing good. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."⁷ God *created us to do good works*, and he prepared those works in advance—before we realized it.

Yes, God knows we are weak, but he calls us to be Christian examples to others. Paul explains, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God



By
Paul Hailey

chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."⁸ Jesus made a similar comment to his disciples, "...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."⁹

Shortly after the disciples received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost they became dramatic examples of God's power by coming out of hiding behind closed doors and preaching fearlessly. The Jewish rulers, elders and teachers were amazed when Peter and John spoke boldly. "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."¹⁰

Likewise, when we do good deeds the Holy Spirit will supply what we lack. Even if our actions are minor, people often note: "He/she is a Christian." God wants us to respond in faith, trusting him to empower us to do what he asks us to do, and then to give him the credit.

When we feel inadequate

In those times when we sense the Holy Spirit prompting us to do something uncomfortable we can follow the response of Moses, Gideon, Solomon, Jeremiah and others by expressing our concerns to God in prayer, then step out in faith. Abraham is an excellent example. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."¹¹ Notice, he went without knowing where

God was leading him. We too may not understand why God prompts us in certain directions, but when we respond, we will experience his power in us when we need it.

God may well ask you and me to perform duties that are beyond our ability, but they will not be beyond *his* ability. He never asks us to do something he will not enable us to do. We can recall the Lord's encouraging words to Zerubbabel, "Not by (human) might nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty."¹²

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."¹³ □

¹ Exodus 3:11

² Judges 6:15

³ Jeremiah 1:6

⁴ Psalm 103:14

⁵ Revelation 3:8

⁶ John 5:30

⁷ Ephesians 2:10

⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:26, 27

⁹ Matthew 5:16

¹⁰ Acts 4:13

¹¹ Hebrews 11:9

¹² Zechariah 4:6

¹³ Hebrews 13:20, 21



A New Year – A New Life

For many people, the new year is a time to leave old problems and fears behind and get a fresh start on life. The trouble is, for most of us, the old problems and fears just won't stay behind us. We want to press forward with our lives, but mistakes, sins and trials seem to have us shackled to the past.

The truth is, though, that for the sake of Jesus Christ, God has forgiven and forgotten our sins. Even though we may still have to live with some of the effects of our sins, we no longer need to feel guilty about them. We no longer need to worry that God doesn't love us or that he doesn't accept us. We no longer need to feel afraid that we might not make it into his glorious kingdom! Yes, we are sinners. But God says that for the sake of Jesus, we are forgiven.

It is my earnest hope and prayer that you will enter the new year with the full assurance of faith that God has forgiven you and made you his beloved child. Think of it! You stand innocent before God. God himself has stepped in to pay your debts and crown you with the dignity and honor of a beloved child!

No matter how far you have advanced or not advanced in your career, no matter how far short you may fall of your personal goals, no matter what sins have marred your life, no matter what a mess you've made of things, no matter how you or others perceive your status or importance in life — regardless of all these things, when you believe the gospel, you belong to God. You are now his, and he makes all things, including you, new.

It isn't that you are suddenly transformed into a faultless person. It's that God has given his grace to you. You see, friends, it's not about what we deserve. It's not about how successful we've been or how hard

we've worked. It's about love. It's about a God who loves us in spite of ourselves. He loves us so much that he did everything that needed to be done to save us from ourselves. He became a man, a human like us, and died on the cross without sin to save us from death and release us from the power of sin in our lives.

Paul refers to God's grace toward us as an indescribable gift.¹ Humanly, it seems far too good to be true. Yet it is true. And it is my prayer that you will know and feel the wonderful truth of God's precious gift to you. That's what the church is all about. It is about worshipping our Redeemer. It is about letting the Holy Spirit lead us to be conformed to the image of Christ. It is about believing the gospel and accepting God's love. It is about letting God's love in us spill out on each other and on all those whom God brings into our lives. It is about sharing the wonderful truth of freedom from guilt and sin and death to all who will listen and believe the good news.

In this world there are important people and unimportant people. In the kingdom of God there is no such thing as an unimportant person. Every person is infinitely important. We are all part of one another through the Holy Spirit. We are one in Christ, and what happens to one of us affects all of us. Every time you have reached out in love to another person, you have helped build and extend the kingdom of God.

Even though the kingdom will not be here in its full glory until Jesus returns, he lives powerfully in his people now. And your gospel work in Jesus' name — whether it's a kind word, a helping hand, a listening ear, a sacrificial labor of love, a prayer of faith or a telling of the story of Jesus — is moving mountains of doubt, tearing down walls of hatred and fear, and attacking strongholds of rebellion and sin. □

¹ 2 Corinthians 9:15

Our Do-Over with Jesus

Have you ever heard of a *mulligan*? I'm not referring to an English stew made of whatever was left in the kitchen. According to the Urban dictionary and Wikipedia, "A mulligan is a *second chance* to perform an action—usually after the first chance went wrong through bad luck or a blunder." It's a term some nonprofessional golfers use when a player hits a bad shot and tries again—often only offering one mulligan per nine holes. After an errant drive the golfer will say, "That's my mulligan," and set up for a new drive. In essence, it's a do-over.

I've got a question. Have you ever wanted a do-over? Perhaps I should ask how many times you've wanted to call "Mulligan," and start over. Perhaps you wish you'd chosen a different career. Maybe you can think of a time you overreacted to your spouse or child and wish you could take it back and start over. Perhaps you think your entire life needs a mulligan—you've made so many mistakes, the only hope is to start over.

Let's go a bit deeper—have you ever wanted to cry "Mulligan" with God? Have you ever said, "Lord, just give me a second chance, or another chance"? "Lord, can I just start over?" Can I believe what the prophet Isaiah said and have God start a new thing? I'm guessing many of us have.

Let me ask one more question. Have you ever heard someone say they aren't good enough for God? When you press, they share that their life is too full of sin for God to want them. They believe they have surpassed God's willingness or ability to forgive—he has no more grace for them. Perhaps you've felt that way a time or two in your own life. I know I have.

Whenever I start to feel I need to call a mulligan or ask for a do-over I start to think about some of the characters in the Bible who likely wanted to call "Mulligan."

Who doesn't think Moses wished he could have called a mulligan when he didn't follow God's instructions? God told Moses to speak to a rock and it would produce water—but Moses let his emotions get in the way, yelled at the Israelites and then struck the rock with his staff. This bad decision cost him dearly.

I would guess the Israelites had several occasions when they wanted a "do-over."

Do you think Samson wished he could call a mulligan when Delilah cut off his hair and he lost his God-given strength?

I'd bet Jonah wished he could call a "do-over" and go direct to Nineveh and skip the whole fish-swallowing episode.

Do you think Peter wishes he could have called, "Mulligan" a few times—like when he told Jesus he could not die, and Jesus had to rebuke him? Or the time he cut off the ear of the servant in the Garden of Gethsemane, or when he denied Jesus three times?

And what about Paul—who doesn't think he wishes he could have called a "do-over" and believed Jesus from the beginning—before he condemned so many early Christians to prison or death?

By Grace
Communion
International

And what about you? I am confident we all have things in our lives we wish we could take back, or do over, and so many times we wish we could say, "Mulligan" and act as if it were a new beginning. And sometimes we let these things—mistakes, sins, omissions—become so big in our mind that we start to believe they affect how God looks at us. We start to believe the lies that we aren't good enough, that we committed that particular sin too many times, that we will never learn, that God can't love someone like us.

But here's the kicker—we don't need mulligans or do-overs. That's good, because the truth is, doing things over wouldn't change much—we'd still be who we are, and we'd likely make many of the same mistakes over again—or we'd just make different mistakes. That's the practical side of the issue, but there is a much more important reason why we don't need mulligans or do-overs—it's because of who God is.

Illustration: I have a pastor friend who spent most of his life believing God had heavenly scales that weighed all our deeds. On one side God lists all your



good deeds, and on the other side he lists all the bad things you did. The hope is your life has more good deeds than bad. Now, my friend knew there was no actual set of scales, but he still struggled with all the mistakes he'd made. And his real fear as a young person was that he would die in the middle of a sin and not have a chance to repent. For example, if he lost control of his car and was headed for a cliff or a tree—the last words out of his mouth would be bad language or a curse. He laughs now, but it was a real fear as he grew up.

God does not call you his beloved because of anything you did, do today, or will do. He calls you his beloved because of who he is.

Since I mentioned Israel as an example of desiring a do-over, let's talk about them a bit.

Israel was a nation because of a promise God gave to one wandering Aramean—Abram. Abram wasn't righteous, but he believed, and that was counted to him as righteousness. Abram—who God renamed Abraham—was given the promise of a son. Rather than wait for God, he had a son through his wife's servant, Hagar. This son, Ishmael, is considered the forefather of the Prophet Mohammad. Around 13 years later, Abraham had another son, Isaac. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was born first, but Jacob manipulated things so he received the birthright instead of Esau and then he deceived his father Isaac so he would receive the blessing reserved for the firstborn.

Jacob had 13 children. Leah gave him six boys and at least one daughter; Rachel gave him two sons. Two more sons were from Leah's servant, Zilpah, and two were from Rachel's servant, Bilhah.

The lives of our forefathers display clearly that God did not choose them because of their example—or their faith. The biblical story focuses on God and his faithfulness. His covenant promise wasn't made because these men were great, but because God is great.

The story continues when 10 of the brothers sold their younger brother, Joseph, to some traders. Joseph ended up in Egypt where God used him in powerful ways. As you know, the entire family ended up in Egypt and there they remained for several centuries.

During that time Israel grew from a large family to nation of people—estimates of 4-6 million people. God led the family to Egypt in the time of severe drought, and he led the nation out of Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey. Did they become righteous while in Egypt? No, far from it. They were a nation of sinners, whiners and complainers—and God remained faithful to them.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of this faithfulness:

This is what the Lord says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:16-19).

Prior to going to Egypt, God gave the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob a new name—Israel—and a covenant. (The name Israel is a combination of the Hebrew words

for "wrestle" and "God" and implies wrestling with or clinging firmly to God.)

When he led them out of Egypt, he gave them a new beginning. And this new beginning is what Isaiah talks about. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. I am doing a new thing." Isaiah is not telling them to forget the Exodus—he is reminding them of it! They are to remember that God makes new beginnings, and this is what they need in Isaiah's day. Forget about how deeply you have sunk into sin—God will renew you now, just as he did before.

There are many scriptures in the Bible reminding us that God does not count our sins against us; that he has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west; that nothing can separate us from his love. But sometimes we think those passages apply to others, and not necessarily to us. After all, we know better and we still sin. (As if others don't know better, so their sins are not as offensive.) It's easy to think we aren't good enough, we aren't studying or praying enough, we aren't giving enough, we can find all kinds of things that make us feel we aren't right with God and we feel the need to ask for a mulligan or a do-over so we can get right with God. When we feel this way, however, we need to recognize that our feelings are lying to us. Yes, you heard that correctly. Our feelings can and do lie to us—especially when it comes to our relationship with God.

On our own, we will never be good enough for God—and he doesn't expect us to be, because he is good enough for us. Our past, our sins, our rebellion is not, and never can be, more powerful than God's grace.

We don't need a do-over with God because he's already given us the ultimate do-over in Christ. We don't need to call a mulligan because he doesn't hold our sins against us. God, through Jesus Christ, gave us the perfect mulligan, the perfect do-over. He gave us a new beginning, the old is not counted against us—we are a new creation.

It's been said, yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not promised, you just have today. Right here and right now, is what matters in your relationship with God.

Take some time this week and pray about the things you have felt are holding you back from a right relationship with God. Then ask him to help you remember that his grace is always bigger than our sins. Ask God to help you stop focusing on the past and stop worrying about the future—ask him to help you see him today.

Listen to the words of Isaiah: *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?"*

See what God has done, is doing and promises he will do. He is doing a new thing in you—open your eyes to see it spring up. Jesus came for you, he died for you, he rose from the grave for you, he ascended for you, and he sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in you.

Give God this day, today. Surrender all to him—the good, the bad, the ugly, the things that can break us and the things that can make us—and live in his goodness, dwell in his righteousness. You are a new creation in him—do you not perceive it? ☐



God Is Relationship

We owe a great deal of Western thinking to the Greek philosopher and scientist, Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle taught that there were ten different qualities to all things, including “substance” and “relationship.”

Substance is that which is “independent” of all else and can stand on its own. Aristotle ranked substance as the highest quality. In early Christian traditions, the West tried to build on Aristotle to prove that this God whom we had come to understand as Trinitarian was a substance. We didn’t want an ephemeral old *relationship* God, you know. We wanted a *substantial* God whom we could prove was as good as anybody else’s God!

Yet, when Jesus called himself the Son of the Father and yet one with the Father, he is giving clear primacy to *relationship*. Who you are is who you are in the Father, as he would put it. That is your meaning and your identity. Jesus says to his Father, “I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:22-23).

Humans are not independent substance, nor is any part of creation; it all exists in radical relationship—ecosystems, orbits, cycles, and circulatory systems. To the Western mind, this “mere” relationship looks like second or third best to being self-made and independent.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine (354–430) described Trinity as God in three substances united as

By Richard Rohr

one. By the next century, God is one substance who happens to have three relationships. Aquinas (1225–1274) comes along in the thirteenth century saying that God is one substance, but the relationships constitute the very nature of that substance, *subsistent relationship*. Now we are prepared to say that God is not, nor does God need to be, “substance” in the Aristotelian sense of something independent of all else. God is relationship itself.

I would name *salvation* as simply the readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to stay in relationship. As long as you show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working. *Self-sufficiency makes God experience impossible!* That’s why Jesus showed up in this world as a naked, vulnerable one, a defenseless baby lying in the place where animals eat. Talk about utter relationship! Naked vulnerability means I’m going to let you influence me; I’m going to allow you to change me. The Way of Jesus is an invitation to a Trinitarian way of living, loving, and relating—on earth as it is in the Godhead. We are intrinsically like the Trinity, living in absolute relatedness. To choose to stand outside of this Flow is the deepest and most obvious meaning of *sin*.

We call the Flow *love*. We really were made for love, and outside of it we die very quickly.□



What is Salvation?

Salvation is a rescue operation. To understand salvation, we need to know what the problem was, what God did about it, and how we respond to it.

When God made humans, he made them “in his own image.”¹ We are in some way like God himself. That’s because God has something special in mind for us. But as we all know, humans can be rather ungodly as well. Humans are noble and crude at the same time. We can have high ideals, and yet be barbaric.

In other words, we are not the way we are supposed to be. Even though we have messed ourselves up, God still considers us to be made in his image.² The potential is still there for us to be like God. This is why he has done something to rescue us, to save us, to restore the relationship he had with us.

God wants to give us eternal life, free from pain, on good terms with God and with each other. He wants our intelligence, creativity and power to be used for good. He wants us to be like he is, to be even better than the first humans were. This is salvation.

The center of the plan

We need to be rescued. And God has done this—but he did it in a way that no human would have expected. The Son of God became a human, lived a perfect life, and we killed him. And that, says God, is the salvation we need. What irony! We are saved by a victim! Our Creator became flesh so he could die for us. But God raised him back to life, and through Jesus, he promises to resurrect us, too.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the death and salvation of humanity is represented and made possible. His death is what our failures deserve, and as our Creator, he paid for all our failures. Though he did not deserve death, he willingly died for our sins, on our behalf.

By Dr. Michael Morrison

Jesus Christ died for us and was raised for us.³ Our old self died with him, and a new person is brought back to life with him.⁴ In one sacrifice, Jesus atoned “for the sins of the whole world.”⁵ The payment has already been made; the question now is how we are to receive the benefits. We participate in the plan through repentance and faith.

Repentance

Jesus came to call people to repentance.⁶ Peter told people to repent and turn to God for forgiveness.⁷ Paul said people “must turn to God in repentance.”⁸ Repentance means to turn away from sin and toward God. Paul told the Athenians that God overlooked idolatry done in ignorance, but “now commands all people everywhere to repent.”⁹ They should stop their idolatry.

Paul was concerned that some of the Corinthian Christians might not repent of their sexual sins.¹⁰ For these people, repentance would mean a willingness to stop their immorality. Paul preached that people should “prove their repentance by their deeds.”¹¹ We change our attitude and our behavior.

Part of our doctrinal foundation is “repentance from acts that lead to death.”¹² But this does not mean perfect behavior—Christians are not perfect.¹³ Repentance means not that we arrive at our goal, but that we begin traveling in the right direction.

No longer do we please ourselves, but we live to please Christ.¹⁴ Paul tells us, “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness.”¹⁵

Faith

However, simply telling people to repent is not going to rescue them from their failures. Humans have been told

to obey for thousands of years, but they still need to be rescued. Something more is needed, and that is Christ. But we do not experience the blessing of forgiveness if we don't believe that Christ has done this for us. We need faith, or belief. The New Testament says much more about faith than it does repentance—the words for faith occur more than eight times as often.

Everyone who believes in Jesus is forgiven.¹⁶ "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."¹⁷ The gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."¹⁸ Christians are known as believers, not as repenters. Belief is the defining characteristic.

Does this mean that we are to accept certain facts? The Greek word *can* mean that kind of belief, but more often it conveys the sense of trust. When Paul encourages us to believe in Jesus Christ, he is not emphasizing facts. (The devil knows the facts about Jesus, but he isn't saved.)

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we trust him. We know he is faithful and trustworthy. We can count on him to take care of us, to give us what he promises. We can trust him to rescue us from humanity's worst problems. When we turn to him for salvation, we admit that we need help, and that he can provide it.

Our faith does not save us—our faith must be in him, not something else. We commit ourselves to him, and he saves us. When we trust in Christ, we quit trying to save ourselves. Although we try to have good behavior, we do not think our efforts are saving us (diligent effort never made anyone perfect). Nor do we despair when our efforts fail. That's because we are trusting in Christ, not in ourselves, for our salvation. Our confidence is in him, not in our success or failure.

Faith is what motivates repentance. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, when we realize that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, when we know that he wants the best for us, then we become willing to live for him and please him. We make a choice—we give up the pointless and frustrating life we used to have and accept his purpose and direction for what life is supposed to be.

Faith is the internal change that makes all the difference. Our faith doesn't earn anything or add anything to what Jesus has earned for us. Faith is simply the willingness to respond to what he has done. We are like slaves working in the clay pits, and Christ announces, "I have purchased your freedom." We are free to stay in the pits, or we can trust him and leave. The redemption has been done; our part is to accept it and act on it.

Grace

Salvation is God's gift to us, given by his grace, his generosity. We can't earn it, no matter what we do. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."¹⁹ Even our faith is a gift of God. Even if we obey perfectly from now on, we do not deserve a reward.²⁰

We were created for good works,²¹ but good works cannot save us. They follow salvation, but they cannot earn it. As Paul says, if salvation could be achieved by law-keeping, then Christ died for nothing.²² Grace does not give us permission to sin, but grace is given to us when we sin.²³ Whatever good works we do, we thank God for doing them in us.²⁴

God "has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."²⁵ "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."²⁶

Grace is the heart of the gospel: We are saved by God's gift, not by our works. The gospel is "the message of his grace."²⁷ "It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved."²⁸ "We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."²⁹ We would be hopelessly in sin and condemnation, except for grace.

Our salvation depends on what Christ has done. He is the Savior, the one who rescues us. We cannot brag about our obedience, or our faith, because they are always defective. The only thing we can be proud of is what Christ has done³⁰—and he did it for everyone, not just us.



Justification

The Bible explains salvation in many ways: ransom, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, justification, etc. That is because people understand their problem in different ways. For those who feel dirty, Christ offers cleansing. For those who feel enslaved, he offers redemption, or purchase. For those who feel guilt, he gives forgiveness.

For people who feel alienated and put at a distance, he offers reconciliation and friendship. For those who feel worthless, he gives an assurance of value. For people who don't feel like they belong, he describes salvation as adoption and inheritance. For those who are aimless, he gives purpose and direction. For those who are tired, he offers rest. For the fearful, he gives hope. For the anxious, he offers peace. Salvation is all this, and more.

Let's look at justification. The Greek word is often a courtroom term. People who are justified are declared "not guilty." They are exonerated, cleared, acquitted, declared OK. When God justifies us, he says that our sins will not be counted against us. They are removed from the record.

When we accept that Jesus died for us, when we acknowledge that we need a Savior, when we acknowledge that our sin deserves punishment and that Jesus bore the punishment of our sins for us, then we have faith, and God assures us that we are forgiven.

No one can be justified, or declared righteous, by observing the law,³¹ because the law does not save. It is only a standard that we fail to meet, and by that measurement, all of us fall short. God "justifies those who have faith in Jesus." We are "justified by faith apart from observing the law."

To illustrate justification by faith, Paul uses the example of Abraham, who "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."³² Because Abraham trusted God, God counted him as righteous. This was long before the law was given, showing that justification is a gift of God, received by faith, not earned by law-keeping.

Justification is more than forgiveness, more than removing our debts. Justification means counting us as righteous, as having done something right. Our righteousness is not from our own works, but from Christ.³³ It is through the obedience of Christ, Paul says, that believers are made righteous.³⁴

Paul even says that God "justifies the wicked."³⁵ God will consider a sinner righteous (and therefore accepted on the day of judgment) if the sinner trusts God. A person who trusts God will no longer want to be wicked, but this is a result and not a cause of salvation. People are "not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."³⁶

A new start

Some people come to faith suddenly. Something clicks in their brain, a light goes on, and they accept Jesus as their Savior. Other people come to faith in a more gradual way, slowly realizing that they do trust in Christ and not in themselves for their salvation.

Either way, the Bible describes this as a new birth. When we have faith in Christ, we are born anew as children of God.³⁷ The Holy Spirit begins to live within us,³⁸ and God begins a new creation in us.³⁹ The old

self dies, and a new person is being created⁴⁰—God is changing us.

In Jesus Christ, and as we have faith in him, God is undoing the results of humanity's sin. As the Holy Spirit works within us, a new humanity is being formed. The Bible doesn't say exactly how this happens; it just says that it is being done. The process begins in this life and is finished in the next.

The goal is to make us more like Jesus Christ. He is the image of God in perfection,⁴¹ and we must be transformed into his likeness.⁴² We are to be like him in spirit—in love, joy, peace, humility and other godly qualities. That's what the Holy Spirit does in us. He is restoring the image of God.

Salvation is also described as reconciliation—the repair of our relationship with God.⁴³ No longer do we resist or ignore God—we love him. We are changed from enemies to friends. And even more than friends—God says that he adopts us as his own children.⁴⁴ We are in his family, with rights, responsibilities and a glorious inheritance.⁴⁵

Eventually there will be no more pain and sorrow,⁴⁶ which means that no one will be making mistakes. Sin will be no more, and death will be no more.⁴⁷ That goal may seem a long way off when we look at ourselves now, but the journey (just like any other journey) begins with a single step—the step of accepting Christ as Savior. Christ will complete the work he begins in us.⁴⁸

And in the future, we will be even more like Christ.⁴⁹ We will be immortal, incorruptible, glorious and sinless. Our spiritual bodies will have supernatural powers. We will have a vitality, intelligence, creativity, power and love far beyond what we know now. The image of God, once tarnished by sin, will be restored even better than it was before. □

Related articles

1. Jesus Christ: Jesus—The Complete Salvation Package

<https://www.gci.org/articles/jesus-the-complete-salvation-package/>

2. Zooming in on Salvation

<https://www.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=4366>

¹ Genesis 1:26-27

² Genesis 9:6

³ Romans 4:25

⁴ Romans 6:3-4

⁵ 1 John 2:2

⁶ Luke 5:32

⁷ Acts 2:38; 3:19

⁸ Acts 20:21

⁹ Acts 17:30

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 12:21

¹¹ Acts 26:20

¹² Hebrews 6:1

¹³ 1 John 1:8

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:15;
1 Corinthians 6:20

¹⁵ Romans 6:19

¹⁶ Acts 10:43

¹⁷ Acts 16:31

¹⁸ Romans 1:16

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:8-9

²⁰ Luke 17:10

²¹ Ephesians 2:10

²² Galatians 2:21

²³ Romans 6:15;
1 John 1:9

²⁴ Galatians 2:20;
Philippians 2:13

²⁵ 2 Timothy 1:9

²⁶ Titus 3:5

²⁷ Acts 14:3; 20:24

²⁸ Acts 15:11

²⁹ Romans 3:24

³⁰ 2 Corinthians
10:17-18

³¹ Romans 3:20

³² Romans 4:3

³³ 1 Corinthians 1:30

³⁴ Romans 5:19

³⁵ Romans 4:5

³⁶ Galatians 2:16

³⁷ John 1:12-13;
Galatians 3:26;
1 John 5:1

³⁸ John 14:17

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17;
Galatians 6:15

⁴⁰ Ephesians 4:22-24

⁴¹ 2 Corinthians
4:4; Colossians 1:15;
Hebrews 1:3

⁴² 2 Corinthians 3:18;
Galatians 4:19;
Ephesians 4:13;
Colossians 3:10

⁴³ Romans 5:10-11;
2 Corinthians 5:18-21;
Ephesians 2:16;
Colossians 1:20-22

⁴⁴ Romans 8:15;
Ephesians 1:5

⁴⁵ Romans 8:16-17;
Galatians 3:29;
Ephesians 1:18;
Colossians 1:12

⁴⁶ Revelation 21:4

⁴⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:26

⁴⁸ Philippians 1:6

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:49;
1 John 3:2

Is the Ascension of Christ a hoax?

Something came to my mind when I was watching street magicians display their skills in a programme on television. Magicians like David Blaine, Cyril, Chris Angel, and Dynamo were astonishing audiences with performances which could not be explained by the laws of nature. They were doing acts that might be perceived as supernatural. What struck me was how close these acts mirrored the miracles Christ did when He was on earth preaching the gospel. One magician was pouring out hundreds of fish from an empty pail just as Christ miraculously fed a few thousand people by multiplying a loaf of bread and a few fish to start with. Another was walking on water across the river Thames, mirroring Jesus who walked on water to reach his disciples who were out at sea during a storm. These magicians could turn water into some other liquid just as Jesus turned water into wine. But one performance by a famous magician showed him rise into the air and float beside a skyscraper, bringing to mind how Jesus rose into the air when he left His disciples after the resurrection. This event known as the Ascension of Christ is greatly revered in Christianity for it signifies Christ returning to heaven to be at the right hand of the Father.

Was the Ascension a hoax? Was it an illusion to trick the disciples into thinking that He was divine? We need to know, for if it never really happened it would be the biggest lie in history. Let's begin by examining the events before the Ascension. Jesus Christ began His ministry by preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God. For three and a half years He travelled, bringing His message and also performing many miracles as recorded in the gospels. Jesus not only came to preach the message of the Kingdom but also being the Son of God, gave His life as the living sacrifice to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind, thereby rescuing humanity from eternal death. Jesus said that He would rise again bodily from the dead.¹ Did that happen? Indeed it happened as the gospel accounts state. When the women disciples of Jesus came to the tomb after the Sabbath, they found



By
Devaraj Ramoo

the tomb empty. As they stood perplexed, they saw two angels who testified that Jesus had risen from the dead and the women were told to relate these things to the other apostles. Angels were sent to testify that Jesus had risen!

Now after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and also to many others for a period of forty days, reminding them about his message and preparing them to preach the gospel into all the earth. Now when it was time for Him to return to the Father, He didn't simply disappear. He was taken up in a miraculous display, rising from the ground and eventually disappearing out of sight into a cloud.² The disciples would have watched



in astonishment without taking their gaze away for a second! And while they stared steadfastly at the sky again two angels appeared and stood by them.³ The angels testified that Jesus would return in the same manner as He went up into heaven.⁴ Here we see that in both the Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ there was supernatural testimony given by angels, thereby reinforcing the fact that these events were real and very significant. In no way were these

events a magician's illusion or trick. No angels appear to testify when our present day magician celebrities perform their acts.

Why did Jesus ascend? Why did He not just walk away or simply vanish? There is a reason. The word ascend in the Greek language is 'anabaino'. It means to move up, to climb or to rise. It is used to describe an event or action of going to or approaching God. One example from the Old Testament is when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to meet God. He then came down with the Ten Commandments. Therefore the term 'ascend' is used to signify something greater or a more profound event to come. In the gospel of John it is stated that Jesus went up to Jerusalem at a feast of the Jews.⁵ Something significant happened there. In the temple lay a multitude of sick people, blind, lame and paralysed. What better way to describe our present human condition. But now, out of the blues Jesus approaches a man who had been sick for thirty eight years and asks him, "Do you want

Refuse to be average. Let your heart soar as high as it will.

A.W. Tozer

At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done.

Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.

Mother Teresa

Peace is so important. It's a gift God gives us, and it grows in us just like fruit grows on trees—with time and nurturing. The key to living in peace begins with pursuing God and the peace only He can give.

When you realize that God loves you and that He has a plan for your life, you can walk with your head held high—totally confident in who He created you to be.

Joyce Meyer

Sometimes what makes us insecure and vulnerable becomes the fuel we need to be overachievers. The antidote for a snakebite is made from the poison, and the thing that made you go backward is the same force that will push you forward.

T.D. Jakes Quotes

There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind.

C.S. Lewis

Stop worrying about what you aren't and start being happy about who you are.

Worry is like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it will not accomplish anything. Believe that God can give you provision at a moment's notice, because He can. – John Hagee

Faith is believing BEFORE what will only make sense AFTER.

Faith doesn't always mean that God changes your situation. Sometimes it means He changes you.

Steven Furtick

Being a Christian is more than just an instantaneous conversion; it is like a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ.

Billy Graham

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Martin Luther King Jr.

It doesn't take much effort to do what everyone else is doing. A dead fish can float downstream; it takes a live one to swim upstream. It's easy to be common. The pressure comes when you decide to be uncommon.

Everything may not be perfect. There are things that may need to change, but you have the grace to be happy today.

God doesn't take you in a straight line. There are twists and turns. It may not happen the way you thought, but the disappointments, the bad breaks are all a part of God's plan.

Joel Osteen

Continued from page 22

to be made well?" He then proceeds to tell the stricken man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." When Jesus walked into the temple, for the first time grace had arrived at the temple!

Out of the love of God, that man was healed. Isn't that grace? Now after the resurrection, Jesus ascends up to heaven to be with the Father. His going up was to signify something greater that was soon to come. A new reality was going to unfold. The man at the temple once healed would never be the same again. He was made whole. Jesus having ascended into heaven had commanded His disciples earlier to wait in Jerusalem to receive a new reality in their lives. They were now going to be made whole. You see, Jesus going up to heaven is not the conclusion of the story of the gospels. It is the beginning.

Because Jesus ascended to heaven, on the Day of Pentecost the disciples all received the promise of the Father which is the Holy Spirit.⁶ This majestic event could not have taken place without the Ascension of Christ.⁷ Christ ascending brings the promise of something greater in the plan of God. The Holy Spirit was being poured out upon mankind. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He was installed as the King of Kings. All authority was given unto Him. Again if someone has doubts about the Ascension, one only needs to read the prophecy given in the book of Daniel. Chapter 7, verses 13-14 describe in detail the Ascension and also the ceremony in heaven as Jesus comes to the Father to receive dominion, glory and a Kingdom. How could this event be prophesied hundreds of years before Christ was born on the earth if it was a hoax?

Now we come to another question. What has all this got to do with us? We now know that Jesus going up to the Father would bring the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. But there is something more. Jesus ascending to heaven also involves our homecoming to Him. His ascension does not leave us out. We are completely involved for he being the firstborn of many brethren has gone to prepare for our eventual coming.⁸ He has gone to prepare a place for us that at our resurrection we may spend eternity with Him. Even now Jesus is our mediator and High Priest in heaven. He intercedes for us when in our human frailties we sin or stumble in our walk with God. He lifts us up and strengthens us that we can continue to live a godly life in Christ Jesus. All this is not possible without the Ascension. When Jesus was on earth he was limited where he could be at any one time. But now in heaven he is able to mediate for all his people wherever they are. He is mediating for those of us who are on the earth in every part of the world. He makes intercession for us that we can have a loving relationship with God the Father. When we sin, Christ speaks on our behalf for he is not letting anything get between us and the Father. His ascension is the best thing that has happened for us. Because he is there in heaven we are blessed to be able to walk with God.

The Ascension of Christ has such significance in our life as we await the return of Jesus Christ. A deceived world does not believe that Jesus will return. The accounts of the Ascension are brushed aside as lies or fables. Is the Ascension of Christ really a hoax? You decide.☐

¹ Matthew 20:18-19

² Acts 1:9

³ Acts 1:10

⁴ Acts 1:11

⁵ John 5: 1-11

⁶ Luke 24:49

⁷ Acts 2:33

⁸ John 14:2-4

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