

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Apr-Jun 2013

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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Living in easter time

As we near our annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection, it's good to remember that the resurrection is not only a past *event*, but a *continuing reality*.

On Easter Sunday morning, nearly 2,000 years ago, the God-man Jesus rose from death to newness of life. He was not merely revived (as, for example, was his friend Lazarus), but through resurrection became something entirely new—glorified humanity, not subject to death.

Lazarus' grieving sisters asked Jesus to revive their dead brother. He replied, "Your brother will rise again."¹ They thought he was referring to the promised resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. But Jesus' enigmatic, rather shocking statement was this: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Jesus' own resurrection to permanent, enduring, glorified human life, created a new reality for all humanity. He is the resurrection and the life (the resurrection life) for all people. And Jesus said to the sisters that this stunning reality may be experienced by "anyone who believes in me." Even if that believer should die (in their non-glorified flesh), they still will be alive in accordance with the glorified humanity that Jesus shares with them. He is their resurrection life—a life not subject to the death experienced in our non-glorified humanity.

Of course, Jesus was speaking to Mary and Martha prior to the event of his death and resurrection, which brought about the new reality to which he was speaking. Thus when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, that event was a resuscitation, not a resurrection. At that time, Lazarus was restored to non-glorified life, and thus died again at some future date.

But with Jesus' death and resurrection, a new reality was forged for all humanity (Lazarus included). Now, in Jesus, our humanity is glorified-transformed; re-created. And that glorified human life is experienced

by
Ted Johnson

by all who believe in Jesus—who trust him to be who he says he is: *the resurrection and the life*.

Yes, Easter celebrates an ancient event. But it also celebrates a present, continuing reality for all people. Easter tells us that *Jesus is alive!* It tells us that the glorified, incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, is a living person! It reminds us that the incarnation continues forever. There never will be a time when Jesus ceases to be the union of God and humanity in one person (two natures; one person). Therefore, in Jesus (in his humanity, which he bears for us), humankind is glorified forever!

In the historic tradition of the church, Easter is a 50-day-long celebration called Eastertide. This is a reminder to us that Easter is about an enduring life—the life of Jesus, which, through the Spirit, is being

shared with us. So, this Easter, let's remember that *we are now living in Easter time*—the time on this side of the empty tomb!

Something quite amazing happened when Jesus rose from the grave. Not only did he personally rise to new, glorified, life; but, in him, so did all humanity. As Paul points

out in his letters, when Jesus died, we all died; when he rose, we all rose; when he ascended, we all ascended.²

A new humanity was created through Jesus' vicarious death, resurrection and ascension. And that being so, the invitation may now go out to all to *believe!* Through believing, what is true already for them in Christ, will be personally experienced—and that experience transforms the believer as they, through the Spirit, become who they truly are, in Christ.

I pray that during this upcoming Eastertide, you come to an even deeper, richer experience of your true life in Christ, and that you will have opportunity to share the invitation to believe with others. □



¹ John 11:23

² Romans 6:1–9;
1 Corinthians
15:20–26;
Colossians
2:20, 3:1–4

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What our readers say:

Yesterday, while waiting for my medicine in my panel clinic Young & Newton Cap Square, I picked up a magazine to browse through and it happened to be THE PLAIN TRUTH Dec–Jan 2013. It sure speaks the truth. The articles are amazing and contribute to our spiritual growth. It covers real life problems—truly motivating and edifying. If you have old issues please send some and put my name on your mailing list. I am a missionary worker and also teach in cell groups. God bless you.

Grace Davies

Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur

Thank you for the Dec–Jan 2013 issue. All the articles are good. I was especially touched by the articles “The best Christmas gift” by Takalani and “Journeying through grief” by Mak Chew Yeng. Keep up the good work!

Paul

Damansara Utama

The magazine is easy to read and understand and the articles are very enjoyable. I have learned so many good things from THE PLAIN TRUTH. I love it so much and I wish to keep on receiving it regularly! Thank you for the great work. God bless you all.

Lok Kim Dong

Kulai

You have been a great blessing to us with messages of Truth which sets us free! Please accept a token contribution for the continuance of God’s work.

Stella

Thank you for the great magazine that we have been receiving regularly. We are senior citizens. Best wishes.

Dr. Kenny Arul & Thangamalar

THE PLAIN TRUTH teaches and enlightens us with articles full of spiritual knowledge and guidance which strengthens our faith. My family and I thank all the editors, staff and volunteers. God bless.

Shireen Chan

Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to understand the gospel better and reminds me of the presence of God whenever I face difficulties in my life. Most of all, it is a

good magazine as it acts as a messenger of God—spreading the Good News to many.

Kevin Ooi Zi Kai

Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH reminds me of the scriptures. John 8:31–32 says it best—the truth set you free. I like the magazine and look forward to receiving more of it.

Catherine Tay

Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH reminds me of God’s presence. Reading it regularly helps me to grow spiritually and strengthens my faith in the Lord. It encourages me with the message of hope and assurance. Please continue sending it. Thank you.

Steven Soo Lake Keng

Kuching

I share the magazine with so many people in my office. I pray that the hearts of many will be touched and they too will commit their lives to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lim Chuan Leong

Seremban

I want to continue receiving THE PLAIN TRUTH. I enjoy reading the articles. It helps us to reflect on our life on earth and deepens our spiritual knowledge, especially in today’s world. The articles are relevant to our modern generation. Thank you so much. God bless you all.

Viola Wong

Kota Kinabalu

The articles are refreshing; they are not found in other magazines. As a retiree, I find reading the magazine very informative. I find issues that can be controversial are handled most analytically. Thanks for making life interesting.

Pauline Lee

Shah Alam

The articles in THE PLAIN TRUTH are very relevant to our daily living. They are encouraging and motivate and help us experience the love of God.

Teh Siew Heng

Penang

THE PLAIN TRUTH is a valuable and enlightening magazine from which I have

learned many things. I value the magazine and hope you will continue sending it to me.

Loh Boon Choo

Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH helps me to understand God’s word better. The articles are easy to read and understand. It is an enriching magazine compared to other magazines which are available at local Christian bookstores. May the Lord bless the entire PLAIN TRUTH team.

Charles Selladurai

Klang

I have learnt a lot by reading your magazine and I wish to know more about Christ.

Ng Thor Fung

Shah Alam

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What happens when we die?

What could I say that was not an empty platitude, was comforting, and above all—was true?

A funeral is never easy, but this one was going to be particularly difficult. Janet was my wife's second cousin. I had only met her a few times. She seemed to be a successful, attractive person with a lively sense of humor. Then her life fell apart.

Her husband abandoned her in a messy divorce. Her real estate business collapsed, leaving her faced with financial ruin. Then she learned that she had terminal cancer. It was too much. One day she pinned a note to her garage door, saying, "I am in here. But call the emergency services first." Then she took a shotgun and killed herself.

Janet didn't ask for a funeral. She just left instructions that her remains be cremated. The family needed some sort of closure, however, so Janet's children organized a funeral service. They asked me to conduct it.

The funeral was well attended, as Janet had been popular. The people who came represented all parts of the religious spectrum, from belligerent atheists to even more belligerent fundamentalists. Many came from various small sects, each of which claimed to be the only ones with a true understanding of the Bible. There were also folks from the mainline denominations, with traditional understandings of life after death. Some were just stunned and bewildered, and they looked to me to salvage some hope and encouragement out of this tragedy.

I waited in a side room in the funeral parlor's chapel as the as the congregation took their seats and mournful music played in the background. The funeral home had placed the little urn, containing Janet's ashes, on a table at the front. There were a few photos and mementos scattered on tables around the room. The closest relatives sat at the front, putting on a brave face but exhausted by grief.

What could I say that was comforting and not just an empty platitude—but above all—was true?

I know that some ministers and pastors see a funeral as an opportunity to get across their understanding of "the truth." They have the temporary attention of a captive audience, who, confronted with the reality of death, are perhaps more receptive to hearing the truth about what has happened to their loved one. But what is that truth?

Death is a frontier, and it is one we rightly fear to even approach, let alone cross. It is, as Paul wrote, an enemy,¹ and we hold it at bay as long as possible. But eventually it conquers us all. Then what? Most people have some kind of belief that death is not the end. Those who had come to say goodbye to Janet held many different ideas about her situation. Some were convinced she was in heaven with Jesus. Others believed she was asleep, awaiting the resurrection. Maybe some believed she was in purgatory (but



by
John Halford

surely not for long, as she was a devout and sincere Christian). A few were convinced that since Janet had taken her own life, God had sent her straight to hell. So who was right? Or were they all wrong? What, precisely, has God told us happens to us when we die?

The answer is not what you might expect. You see, God has not told us *precisely* what happens immediately after we die. He has told us that, in and because of Jesus, we have victory over death. Jesus assured us that he is anxious for us to join him to experience life in a way that we mortals cannot begin to imagine, and his promise is that this new life will last forever. But beyond that, the Bible is frustratingly vague about the details. Especially the details of what happens *immediately* after we die.

Many ideas

"Wait a minute! Doesn't the Bible say in...?" Perhaps some of you would like to protest, recalling a familiar scripture that seems to give some indication of details. Yes, there are a couple of passages. However, there are other places the Bible tells us something that seems to contradict that, or at least modify it. So we need to be careful. Let's be specific and dogmatic where the Bible is specific and unambiguous. However, if it is not—and on this topic, it is not—we need to approach with caution and humility.

You may be surprised to know that the Bible has little to say *specifically* about what happens immediately after we die. (Note that I keep saying "immediately"—that's important.) By emphasizing some texts over others, you can build a case for any of several points of views. But the result will be a theological house of cards.

Some scriptures suggest that the dead are safely "asleep," and so, we can surmise, will know nothing until the moment of resurrection when Jesus returns.² But others imply that they are in some way conscious and experience emotions. Paul had no fear of physical death. He had, at some time in his eventful life, been given a "visitor's pass" view of heaven, transforming his worldview. Life "here below" had become difficult, and he was eager to begin the next stage. So he wrote to the Philippians, "As long as I'm alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I'd choose. Hard choice! The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better."³

But what did he mean by "be with Christ?" He does not elaborate.

Another Bible writer with a "day pass" view of heaven was John, the author of Revelation. He tells us how "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our

blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed, as they had been, was completed.”⁴

Leaving aside the question of how literally he saw these things, the point is that he does not describe the dead in Christ as being asleep and unconscious. He would hardly invent an analogy that he knew to be heretical. Puzzling, isn’t it?

If anyone should have known, it was Jesus. Just before he died, he asked the Father to receive his

though there is still some question as to exactly what he meant by “paradise.” It’s not necessarily equivalent to “heaven.”

Dead and gone

So you see, the Bible does not really give us a specific, unambiguous answer to the question of what happens to us *immediately* after we die. Yes, we have, for all intents and purposes “departed.” One phase of life is definitely over. The book of Ecclesiastes reminds us to make the most of the “here and now” because, “in the



spirit.⁵ Shortly before that, he made a promise to the repentant thief suffering crucifixion beside him. This man believed that, after death, good people go to “paradise.” Although he had not been a good man, he realized that Jesus had, so he begged him to remember him in whatever came next.

Jesus reassured him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.”⁶

What did he mean by that? In the English language, you can juggle the punctuation, and manipulate it to support several ideas. But the original language in which Jesus spoke these words, and those into which they were translated, had no such distinctions. Enigmatic or not, it is best to take it at face value, even

realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.”⁷

The point the writer is making is that your physical death is a cutoff point. One phase of your existence is finished. So pagans got it totally wrong when they buried food, money, bows and arrow, pots and pans, and other earthly necessities with their dead. But Christians also get it wrong if they reassure themselves that the righteous dead go to heaven immediately, while all the rest are directly consigned to hell. The Bible does not teach that. There does seem to be some kind of interim state for those who have died, but we don’t seem to have enough revealed to be certain about the exact nature of that period.

The fact is, the Bible does not dwell on the details of what happens *in the short term* to the departed. It is as if God is saying, “Don’t worry about it. Leave it to me. I have things under control.” Rather, the emphasis of scripture about what happens when we die is on something far more exciting—the resurrection to what theologian N.T. Wright has called “the life after life after death,” in a new heavens and a new earth.

Jesus first

When Jesus died on the cross, the Father received his

beyond our reach, although not necessarily beyond our imagination.

It is no longer considered preposterous for a scientist to suggest that what we call reality is actually part of a greater reality that we do not directly experience. With the astounding evidence we are uncovering at the frontiers of experimental physics, we are perhaps better equipped to contemplate this idea than ever before. We know there are dimensions we cannot experience, sights we can’t see, and “dark matter” and “dark energy” that exist beyond the reach of our senses

spirit, along with, a little later, that of the repentant thief. “Whatever happens next” when we die, happened to them that day. It, whatever “it” is, continues to be the situation of the thief. But after three days, Jesus was resurrected and then later ascended.

He was resurrected with a body. A real, recognizable body, with genuine body parts—not a wispy, ethereal manifestation that could be made to look like a body when he wanted to make himself visible. This spiritual body was a new life form—a permanent, everlasting version of what he had been before—a *human being made immortal*. No longer bound by the limitations of time and space, Jesus could move back and forth from within the dimensions we experience to those that are

and the instruments we have developed to enhance them. Theoretical physicists now work with ideas that, even a generation ago, would have seemed like science fiction. The more we probe, the stranger and yet more wonderful it all seems. Physicist Freeman Dyson once observed, “The Universe is not only stranger than we imagine. It is stranger than we can imagine.”

Just trying to talk about these ideas in ways we can understand brings us, as theologian and scientist John Polkinghorne put it, to the “frontiers of language.” So we can’t blame people from other times for not having words to express such things, although Paul came close in his epistle to the Romans:

“The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s

coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

“All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance.”⁸

The Bible also tells us that what happened to Jesus will also happen to us. “Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁹ But it’s not just a matter of “seeing” him—as glorious as that may be. Revelation 21 speaks of us living with God—of having fellowship with him; that is the purpose for which we have been made and the purpose for which we have been given salvation.

We will live with the Triune God in never-ending love, joy, and peace. We are given exceedingly great and precious promises, Paul says, and God will do more for us than we can even think to ask or imagine.

This, then, is the Bible’s focus when it speaks of life after death: Jesus himself is the new and living way.¹⁰



A new heaven and a new earth

We need to revamp our ideas of “eternal life.” It will certainly be a rest from anxiety, feelings of guilt and the limitations of our frail bodies. But it will be filled with activity and experiences—all you could possibly want in this life—and much, much, more. Eternity will not be spent in a sort of nebulous nether world, utterly alien to everything we have experienced and everything we enjoy. Surely, no one really looks forward to sitting on a cloud playing a harp, do they? About five minutes of that would be more than enough for most of us.

Fortunately, that is one of our ideas, not God’s.

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,” wrote Paul to the Corinthians. He added, “but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”¹¹

At least, he gives us some tantalizing glimpses. We can get foretastes of it when we experience the wonderful things about being alive now. Human love, hard-won accomplishment, deep friendships and acts of genuine unselfishness—those moments when we think, “I wish life were always like this” give us “flash

forwards” to another kind of existence. It is the way we were meant to live, the way the world could be—and *will be* one day. They encourage us to join Jesus Christ in hoping and waiting for it with, as Paul said, “joyful anticipation.”

So, could it be that the joyful anticipation continues in some way immediately after our physical death? Although we should not be dogmatic, there is enough in the Scriptures to show this is a strong possibility.

In the parking lot

Here is an analogy that might help. If you have ever visited one of the great theme parks on a holiday weekend, you’ll know that the journey to get there is the worst part—crowded roads, hot car, fraying tempers. But finally, you pull into the parking lot.

The parking lot is still not the theme park, but you do feel you have arrived. There is upbeat music coming from loudspeakers. Helpful attendants are there to guide you to a parking space and the transportation to

the main gate. In the distance you can see the tops of some of the rides, and you hear the sounds of people enjoying themselves. It is a foretaste of what you too will soon experience.

You have not yet arrived at the final destination, but you are no longer outside. The hardest part of the journey is over. Perhaps you are eager to get started, and your children are tugging at you, asking, like those

souls under the altar John saw in Revelation, “Can we go in now?” The answer is, “All in God’s good time.”

In God’s good time, the new heavens and the new earth will be revealed. There may be some surprises, but surely no disappointments for those who have eagerly awaited the fulfillment of our destiny.

This is what was going through my mind as I pondered what to say at Janet’s funeral. We were saying goodbye to a loved one. But could it be that somewhere—in a place beyond our reach and experience, God was saying “Hello. Welcome—not to your eternal rest—but to the rest of eternity?”

When she took her life, Janet confronted her last enemy. She will never meet another one. Her days of pain and despair are over. Whatever her current state, her future is secure in the arms of a loving God. This is what those who loved her needed to know.

I walked out into the chapel, faced the audience and said, “In this little urn is all that is left of Janet that does God does not want.”

Then I told them the rest of the truth. □

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:26

² 1 Corinthians 15:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:14

³ Philippians 1:22–23

⁴ Revelation 6:9–11

⁵ Luke 23:46

⁶ Luke 23:43

⁷ Ecclesiastes 9:10

⁸ Romans 8:19–23

⁹ 1 John 3:2

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:20

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 2:9–10

Waters of life

Sometimes we forget what a blessing it is to be able to turn on a faucet and have fresh, clean, cool water gush out. Many are not so fortunate.

I am most often reminded of this on my trips into rural areas of Southern Africa. A 25-liter container and a several-kilometer walk to the nearest muddy stream provide enough water to keep a household alive for another day.

This thought inspired a recent well-digging project in Zambezia, one of the northern provinces in Mozambique. Grace Communion International has about 80 congregations in Mozambique, all of them rural, and none of the villages where the churches are located have easy access to fresh water. Several generous congregations in Canada had offered to finance digging wells in the hope of improving the quality of life of our brothers and sisters in Mozambique.

Accompanied by two friends and trailers loaded with concrete pipes, we headed for Morrumbala, a small village north of the mighty Zambezi river where GCI Mozambique is establishing its headquarters.

We travelled for four days and slept uncomfortably alongside the road or in the front seats of the

vans, but the incredible welcome we received when we finally arrived, accompanied by much singing and dancing in true African style, made it all worthwhile. We collapsed exhausted into our tents.

Early the next morning, we three intrepid first-time well diggers arose, hoping beyond hope that our project would be successful and we would be able to assist the village by providing them with easily accessible fresh water for the first time in their lives. Two sites were chosen: one in the village where Pastor Mariano Binzi (GCI National Leader) lives, and the other on the GCI church property, which is on a crossroads. A well there, where the roads meet, would benefit many more of the local people.

Teams of diggers were assembled, the pipes unloaded, and digging began, with the local chief

by
Tim Maguire

removing the first spade-full of earth.

Fortunately, the ground was soft and sandy and progress was rapid at first, with the diggers driven by the excitement of the project. As we dug deeper, we used buckets to haul up the soil being removed, and additional rings were positioned to protect the workers and the well from cave-in.

The diggers worked all day and well into the night, always hopeful and on the lookout for any sign of water. Early the next morning a cheer arose as the first well hit water. A few hours later we were doubly rewarded with water in the second well back in the village, just about five meters below the surface.

We departed three days after arriving, with one well completed and the second just requiring another half-meter of deepening to increase the water supply. I

knew that life in the village would never be the same again.

I couldn't help but think of the analogy that Christ used: he is the source of living water, and that those who thirst should come and drink of his eternal waters and never thirst again.

The Holy Spirit, the gift that Christ offered to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, is compared to a fountain of water.¹ He imparts growth and gives



life. Without a relationship with God, which is made possible through Christ's sacrifice and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we remain spiritually dead and lifeless, living in much the same state as so many in Mozambique do. They had survived from day to day, unaware that the amazing gift of water was right there with them, but they just could not see it.

Next time you turn on your faucet, think of those who are less fortunate than you and who don't enjoy free access to an endless stream of living water! You will probably never have the chance to dig a well for somebody who needs life-giving water, but there are many who thirst spiritually and don't realize that Christ is near and they need never thirst. Why don't you offer to show them the well of life, where they can drink freely and never thirst again? □

¹ John 4:10

The ascensi

Ascension Day was a holiday in South Africa before 1994. It was always on a Thursday, and it was one of the annual long weekends. After 1994 the government started reviewing holidays, including Christian holidays. Ascension Day was one of them. At that time, when Ascension Day was being abolished, I don't remember many Christians raising any objection. If it was Christmas or Good Friday, there would probably have been a lot of noise. I conducted a simple survey on Facebook to check how many people know when Ascension Day was this year. Sadly, I found that almost half of professing Christians did not know.

Ascension was such a central belief of Christians that it was included in most of the Christian Creeds of the early church. For example, we have what is called the Apostles' Creed. It was not developed by the apostles, but it is believed to have summarized what the apostles believed in. One of the statements in the Apostles Creed is the belief in Jesus Christ who "...ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty..."

In the early church they used to recite this when they met. In the Reformed church which I used to attend, we used to recite this creed. At that time I had no clue why we recited it, but today I realize why this is crucial for believers. They have helped the church to preserve doctrinal soundness throughout the history of the church. For the believers in that age, the belief in the ascension was as important as the belief in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The same way

For most Christians today it is easier to understand why the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus are important. But why does the ascension matter to us today as something we believe in? The ascension event is recorded in Acts 1:9–11. "After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!'"

During the 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus appeared and disappeared to his followers on various occasions. But on this particular day, he did not just disappear. He was lifted up into the clouds before their very eyes.

But why was it important that Jesus ascended in this way, and did not simply disappear like he did during the previous 40 days? If he did not leave this way, there would have been stories today about where he is. Some would be saying they saw him here or there. Jesus himself emphasized this point of knowing where he will be and how he will come back. "So if someone tells you, 'Look, the Messiah is out in the desert,' don't

by
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bother to go and look. Or, 'Look, he is hiding here,' don't believe it! For as the lightning flashes in the east and shines to the west, so it will be when the Son of Man comes."¹

So, Jesus ascended visibly because he would return visibly. When Jesus returns, no human on earth will not be aware. All humans will be aware, and even those who are asleep will wake up. In fact, believers who are dead will also wake up and join him in the descent.

Concerning the ascension, Paul tells us, "For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus."² "For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God."³ So if it is true that we have ascended with Jesus, and are now seated with him at the right hand of God, we will descend with him when he returns. Those who have died in the faith, and those that are in the faith and alive, will together be caught up in the clouds to meet Jesus, and the world will see Jesus descend with all the believers with him. By then they will be transformed into a similar body he ascended with, and will share in his glory.

Implications of the ascension for Christians

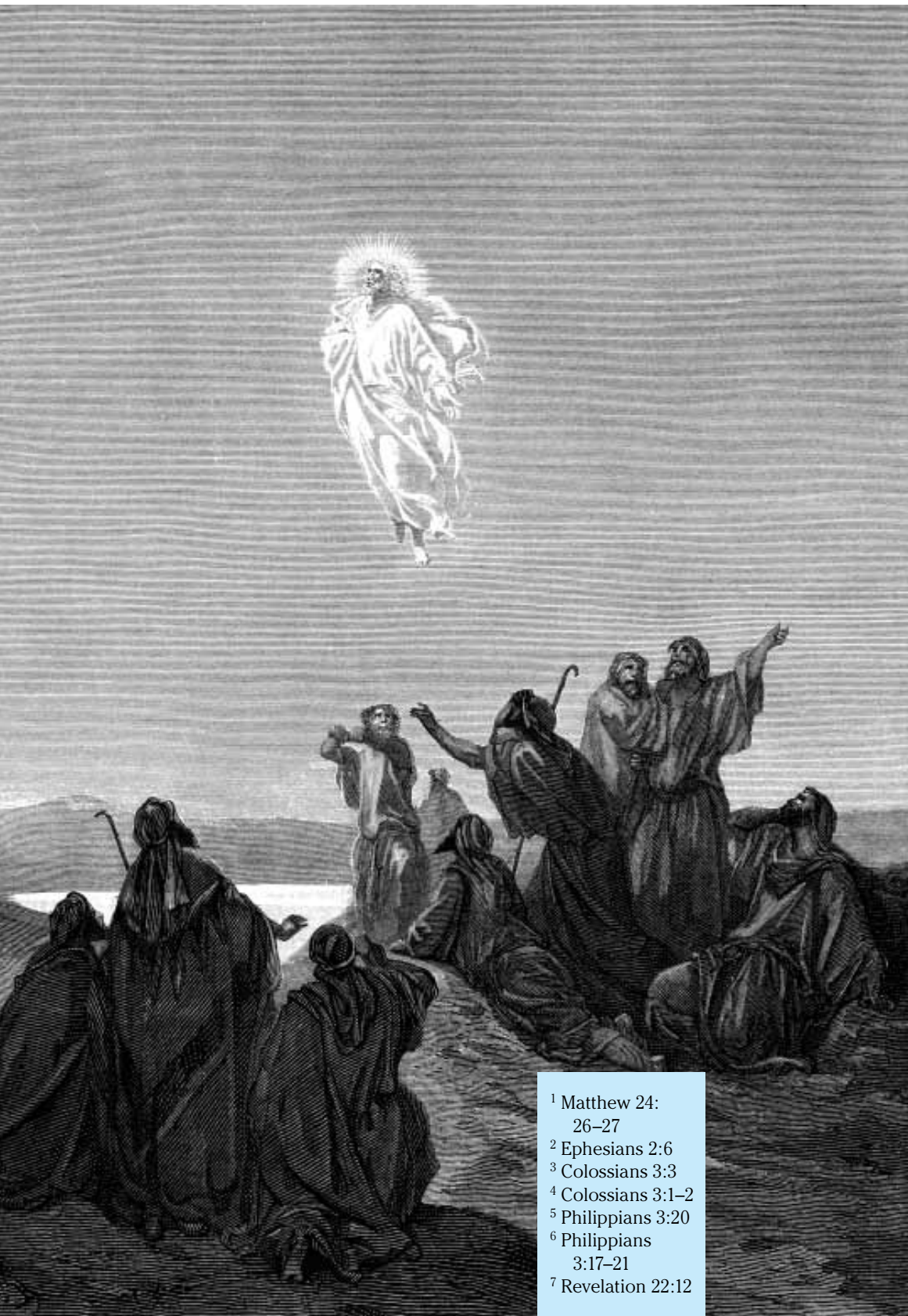
But what are the practical implications of the ascension for Christian believers today? I believe this is found in Paul's letter to the Colossians. He says to them, because we have been raised with Christ, and are seated with him in the heavenly realms, "set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."⁴ The hope of the resurrection and the return of Christ makes believers live like kingdom citizens, because they are citizens of heaven.⁵

The Ascension gives us hope

It is this belief which spurred the Apostles to forsake everything and pursue the kingdom of God at great cost. The same belief made Paul write the following to the Philippians with tears in his eyes: "Dear brothers and sisters, pattern your lives after mine, and learn from those who follow our example. For I have told you often before, and I say it again with tears in my eyes, that there are many whose conduct shows they are really enemies of the cross of Christ. They are headed for destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and they think only about this life here on earth. But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control."⁶

Christians are like the woman who was engaged to be married when war broke out. Her fiancé was sent to war. Before he left he promised her that he would come back, and when he came back she must be

on and you



¹ Matthew 24:
26–27

² Ephesians 2:6

³ Colossians 3:3

⁴ Colossians 3:1–2

⁵ Philippians 3:20

⁶ Philippians
3:17–21

⁷ Revelation 22:12

ready to marry him. After he had left she got the wedding dress done to her size. Since then she started watching her weight to make sure that when her man returns she will be able to fit into her dress. She stopped flirting with other men. Everybody knew she was waiting for her man. Her whole life reflected that. Each month she would go into her bedroom and fit the dress to make sure she had not gained weight. One day as she was busy fitting her dress, there was a knock on the door. She went to check who it was, still wearing the dress. As she opened the door, there he was! Her man was back! He could not believe his eyes. His bride was ready. With tears in his eyes, he said to her, “When I said you must be ready to marry me when I return, I had no idea you would be this ready...”

Like this woman, Christians also await their bridegroom, and as they wait, they live like those who wait, those with hope. The bridegroom says to us: “Look, I am coming soon, bringing my reward with me to repay all people according to their deeds.”⁷ When people in the world look at you, can they say, “Yes, this man, this woman, is waiting for her LORD.” We live like people with hope for something. The ascension gives us that hope.

May the Ascension be a perpetual reminder for you that this Jesus who ascended into heaven “will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go.” And may that knowledge transform you and how you live your life today!

Incidentally, Ascension Day this year falls on Thursday, 9th May. □

Does our salvation

Salvation—the act of saving people from sin and death—is an important Christian doctrine. But how does it work? Whose responsibility is it? Does it depend on what we do, what God does, or both, like God doing 50% and we doing 50%?

This article explains how salvation works—what God’s part is and what our part is.

But first let’s clear a common misconception.

Misconception

Many Christians view salvation as a *transaction* like buying something and paying for it. They say God will forgive our sins *if* we confess our sins, say the sinner’s prayer and get baptized. They believe we must do these in order to receive salvation.

This, however, is incorrect. It implies that we must *do* something to receive. But Scripture tells us that salvation is a free gift.¹ We cannot earn it by repenting, saying the sinner’s prayer and getting baptized. Not that these are wrong or not important. We do these to acknowledge our sinful condition and our need for God’s mercy and forgiveness; they are *not* conditions.

The truth about our salvation

We can view salvation from two perspectives—from God’s perspective and from our (human) perspective. Seen from *God’s perspective*, it is called *objective or universal truth*. It is how God sees us. Seen from *our perspective*, it is called *subjective or personal experience*. It is how we see ourselves. Both perspectives are important, so let’s look at them.

Objective/universal truth

The objective perspective declares that God has secured salvation for *all* people in and through his son Jesus Christ and by his Holy Spirit. He did that for us because of his great love for us, not because of our good deeds or good behaviour. *It is 100% God’s work.*

God doesn’t want any to perish.² He wants everyone in his kingdom (family). That includes young and old, males and females, rich and poor, strong and weak and the good and the bad. It includes those who are dead, those who live now and those who will live in the future. Everyone is loved, reconciled,³ forgiven, accepted and adopted as a child of God.⁴

What a relief that is! We don’t have to prove or show anything to God in order to receive our salvation! That’s really good news because all of us have messed up our lives to one degree or another. And even our righteous deeds are suspect because they are often laced with selfish motives.

The Son/Word of God became flesh⁵ for our sake because we failed to live a godly life. Jesus came as our *substitute* and *representative*. He was born and baptized *for us*. He suffered and died for us. He was buried, raised and ascended for us. He received glory, power, wisdom and riches for us. He lived a perfect life for us,



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on our behalf and with us (as a human). And he has given his perfect humanity to us as a free gift. We might say he *recreated* us through his own incarnate life.⁶ And he is now sharing his humanity with us so that we might participate in his intimate and joyful relationship with his Father in heaven.

This truth is based on what Jesus has *done* and *become* (perfect human) for us. The first Adam, representing humanity, brought death because of sin. The second Adam, Jesus, also representing humanity, brought life because of righteousness.⁷ Jesus took us through his own life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension. That is, we died with him, were raised with him and ascended with him. That is how we are born again (recreated), not by overcoming our sins.

As our salvation depends entirely on what God has done for us and to us, we need not worry if we are good enough for him to accept us. In Christ, we are already accepted⁸ and qualified for God’s kingdom.⁹

Subjective/personal experience

The subjective perspective, on the other hand, is based on our individual experiences in life. It is based on our feelings—how we feel about



Can we depend on us?



ourselves in good times and bad times. These include our joy and sorrow, courage and fear, acceptance and rejection, success and failure and good fortune and bad fortune. All these are subjective because they change as our circumstances change.

It is very important to distinguish between the two perspectives—God’s objective/universal truth and our subjective/personal experience. The objective is *eternal* whereas the subjective is *temporal*.¹⁰ The objective is based on how God sees us while the subjective is based on how we see ourselves. We don’t always see what God sees. His ways and thoughts are higher than ours.¹¹ That means our faith must rest on what God tells us, not on how we feel about ourselves.

Union and participation

The objective truth declares that Jesus has *recreated* and *united* us to himself. We are in union with him. We belong to him and he belongs to us. He is *in* us and we are *in* him. We don’t live separate lives.

But salvation is more than our union with Christ. Once united, we must live or participate in our new life. We must let Jesus live his life in and through us by his Spirit. Only then can we experience the abundant life.¹² Union and participation go together. It’s like a man and a woman marrying and living together as husband and wife. *Getting married is union; living together is participation.*

The sacraments—Baptism and Communion—picture this reality beautifully. *Baptism pictures our union with Christ.* We are baptised into his death and raised in his resurrection and ascension. It is a *one-time* thing. *Communion pictures our participation in his life and his participation in our life.* He cleaves to us and we cleave to him. It is a joint life and it is an *on-going* reality.

Implications

There are several implications associated with the objective/universal and subjective/personal perspectives. Let’s look at a few.

Why live righteously if salvation is already ours?

It’s a silly question. It’s like asking: “We are married, why do we have to live together?” The reason we marry is because we want to live together.

Attending church, studying the bible, contributing money, sharing the gospel, doing good works and living holy lives are important. Not because they count toward our salvation. *We do them because that is our new lifestyle.* The Holy Spirit dwelling in us leads us to holy living. We are *not* saved because *of* good works, but *for* good works.¹³ Salvation is by grace and by grace alone through faith in Christ.¹⁴

Are we teaching universal salvation?

The objective truth declares that God has secured salvation for *all* people. It includes those who had

died without hearing/believing the gospel. It includes those who are mentally abnormal. It includes atheists, betrayers, dictators, terrorists, fanatics, hypocrites, covetous, addicts, adulterers, gays, prostitutes and liars. It includes all.

Wow! That sounds like universal salvation. No, it's *not*. There is a difference. *Universal salvation* means God offers salvation to all *whether they want it or not*. That is equivalent to God *forcing* everyone to accept his salvation. *Universal truth*, on the other hand, means that God has secured salvation for all, but *each* must individually receive it.

Love means *freely giving* and *freely receiving*. Because God is love, he will not force his salvation on anyone no matter how good it is. He offers it freely and he expects us to receive it freely. Receiving *cannot* be considered work because we really didn't work for it.

Here is an analogy. Suppose God has deposited one trillion dollars into your bank account and asks you to take and spend the money as your heart desires. If you believe his word, you will take and spend the money on things that will give you great pleasure. But if you don't trust him, you will continue to live a pauper's life even though you do *have* the money. Salvation is like that. God has already secured it for you, but you must receive it to enjoy it.

Why are many not experiencing the abundant life?

The answer is: they are not *actively participating* in their new (recreated) life. *The key to abundant living is participation*. Those who live their new life get to experience the abundant life; those who don't, miss out. The more we participate, the more joyful we are. This joy is a spiritual attribute and has nothing to do with our physical circumstances.

Receiving and participating in our new life produces a *heavenly* life while denying or rejecting it produces a *hellish* life. God gives us the power (freedom) to choose heaven or hell. Heaven and hell are indeed in our hands!

Why do believers who actively participate still suffer?

The answer is: we still live in a *fallen* world. Sin—ours and others—does take a toll on us. Only when the *fullness* of God's kingdom comes there will be no suffering. Until then there will still be suffering. But individually we can live holy lives and receive his blessings of love, joy, peace, forgiveness, acceptance, contentment, fellowship, assurance and hope.

What about the incorrigibly wicked?

Does God offer salvation to the wicked—to dictators like Hitler who killed three million Jews, suicide bombers like those who crashed into Twin Towers killing several thousands, betrayers like Judas Iscariot who betrayed Lord Jesus, serial killers, paedophiles, corrupt politicians/businessmen, drug barons, and scam operators? Will they ever be saved?

To answer that question, we must ask: "Why did they become like that?" What made them like that? We can think of several reasons: broken homes, dysfunctional families, lack of moral/spiritual teaching, oppressive environment, negative peer pressure, greed, cultic teachings, physical/mental illness and the devil's influence.

Is God powerless to save these people? Are they lost

forever?

The truth is: Jesus has *already* secured salvation for all people, but *not all know or believe now*. They will in due time, however long that takes. God is extremely patient. His grace covers *all* sins, no matter how ugly they are. There is no sin that he cannot forgive. He can work with the most difficult cases—rebels, criminals, idolaters, greedy people, self-righteous and hard core addicts. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can thwart God's plan to save the people he created—be they powers of darkness, oppressive environment, persecution, negative peer pressure, dysfunctional families, addiction, cultic teachings or death.¹⁵ The gospel of salvation will reach everyone, sooner or later, with or without us. All will hear, but each must individually receive it.

What about unbelievers?

Jesus *is* our salvation. That means there is no salvation outside of Christ. Those who reject and refuse to participate in their new life will continue to experience *hell*—guilt, shame, condemnation, fear, torment, hopelessness, insecurity and death. Hell is *alienation* from God. It is living a life apart from him.

But how come some unbelievers also seem to live happy lives? *Objectively speaking, Jesus is in everyone whether they know it or not.*¹⁶ Every good and perfect gift is from God.¹⁷ To the extent they do good works and live righteously, they will experience joy. But that joy is still limited and is temporary. It cannot compare with the joy that believers have in Christ.

Salvation is God's gift to us

In Adam *all* died; in Christ the same *all* are made alive.¹⁸ Jesus has secured salvation for all, but not all know or believe. This is the objective/universal truth. Those who believe and participate get to experience the heavenly life here and now; those who don't, miss out. This is the subjective/personal experience. While God offers salvation to all, each must receive personally to benefit from it.

*The gospel is radical—revolutionary. It changes everything we know about God, others, ourselves and the creation. We can declare this truth boldly because Jesus rose and ascended to heaven taking all humanity with him.*¹⁹ *It's a done deal.* This truth is based solely on what God has done for us in and through his son Jesus and by his Spirit. It has absolutely nothing to do with us.

Over the centuries, millions have embraced and experienced their new life in Christ—albeit in different measures. Many are experiencing it now. Many will experience it in the future. God calls different people at different times and he has given Christians the privilege to go and share this message of salvation with all people in all nations so that they too may hear and receive it. God's salvation has no deadline. The salvation door will always be open²⁰ because God's love will never stop flowing. May you receive this precious gift and be richly blessed. Amen. □

¹ Ephesians 2:8

² 2 Peter 3:9

³ 2 Corinthians 5:19

⁴ Ephesians 1:5

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:22

⁸ Ephesians 1:6

⁹ Colossians 1:12

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 4:18

¹¹ Isaiah 55:8–9

¹² John 10:10

¹³ Ephesians 2:10

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8

¹⁵ Romans 8:38–39; 1 Peter 3:18–20

¹⁶ Acts 17:28

¹⁷ James 1:17

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:22

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:5–6

²⁰ Revelation 21:24–26, 22:17

The burning bush

Christians are often referred to as “fellow workers” with God in the task of spreading the good news of salvation through Christ. The Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth included this comment, “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.”¹ In other New Testament letters Paul praised various churches for being fellow workers by giving him financial support, and for sending food to other Christians during a time of famine.

We who are Christians today also have the opportunity and privilege to be fellow workers with God. All of us can help in some way, whether it be assisting those who publicly proclaim the way of salvation, or by performing Christian deeds by helping people who are in need. You and I may wonder *how* we can be of assistance. After all, most of us are not highly capable and influential people. “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.”²

To put it simply, we tend to be the “nobodies” of the world. Nevertheless, God invites us to be fellow workers with Him. What a privilege that is! But it may be an intimidating thought, especially for those of us who are shy. Even more intimidating may be those times when

we sense that He is prompting us to do something that is entirely out of our comfort zone. We may balk and ask “Why me?” We may plead, “Send someone else!” If so, we will be reacting just as Moses did.

Moses and the burning bush

You probably know the story. The Israelites were held captive in Egypt, forced into slavery. The Egyptians didn’t want them to grow strong militarily, so they killed newborn Israelite boys. An Israelite mother who had given birth to a baby boy placed the child in a basket and put the basket into the Nile River, desperately



by
Paul Hailey

hoping that he would be rescued. One of Pharaoh’s daughters saw the basket floating in the river and took the baby as her own child, naming him Moses and raising him in Pharaoh’s palace. After learning he was actually an Israelite, Moses became concerned over the plight of his fellow Israelites. One day he saw an Egyptian slave master beating an Israelite. Moses intervened, killed the Egyptian, and seeing his life would be in danger, fled Egypt, married, and settled down into a quiet life.

Years later, while tending a herd of sheep, Moses saw a flaming bush. But strangely, the bush wasn’t consumed by the fire. As he stepped aside to take a close look, God spoke to him out of the bush, introducing Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the patriarchs of the Israelites that were still slaves in Egypt. God then gave Moses a daunting task—free the Israelites. God was sending him back to Egypt, to confront the mighty Pharaoh! Moses balked. He didn’t want the assignment. He objected saying, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”³ He felt inadequate. But God did not relent. He told Moses that He would be with him. Moses continued to object, complaining that no one would believe him. God then told him he could use his

shepherd’s staff to work miracles in Egypt, and He gave a dramatic demonstration by turning Moses’ shepherd’s staff into a snake.

Still Moses objected, saying he wasn’t eloquent in speaking, and begged God to send someone else. God told him he would be accompanied by his brother Aaron, who was a better speaker.

In spite of his reluctance, Moses did as God told him. By speaking some words and raising his staff he became God’s instrument in performing dramatic



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In the beginning

Many South Africans suffer from eating disorders, whether it is being overweight, obese, anorexic or bulimic.

They feel as if they are unworthy, unwanted and ugly and then turn to food, or the lack thereof, as a means to cope with their lives. Negative things that other people say to them in passing tend to escalate these feelings of inadequacy until the individual firmly believes that he or she is worthless.

I can attest to these overwhelming feelings myself and have firsthand knowledge of how things people say can shape the way we see ourselves. The good news is that there is hope. God has not left us alone in our darkest hour and he can help.

It took me more than 60 years to figure this out, but my prayer is that you can benefit from my experience and see that even in areas we consider unworthy of God's attention, he is with us each step of the way.

The battle of the bulge

In my case the battle of the bulge started early in my life and at the tender age of 10. I had already learnt that food brought me comfort...or so I thought. For most of my childhood being overweight was just part of the norm. I grew up on a farm, and my entire family believed that eating healthy meant eating lots.

I had to go to boarding school for the last two years of my school career. By then the pattern of compulsive eating was deeply entrenched. Apart from feeling very awkward and uncomfortable when I walked, I felt unwell most of the time. I was ashamed of how I looked. I felt nobody could love me for who I was.

The straw that finally broke the camel's back was a roommate's careless remark to a friend one day. She said: "Did you see that fat girl I have to share a room with? I am sure she's is going to eat all the food at our table!"

That sent me over the edge. I resolved to show them up and then ended up virtually starving myself over a three month period to reach my goal. Even after dropping three dress sizes, the nagging thought that I was not good enough plagued me. This cancer of shame, guilt and unworthiness stayed with me for the best part of my adult life.

I tried almost every diet or pill that was supposed to be the answer to my weight problem but none of them really helped. At best they brought temporary relief to what I considered a permanent problem.

What I did not realise at the time was that it not only affected my eating habits but my relationship with my husband, my children and others as well. The way we see ourselves often affects how we treat other people and how we allow them to treat us. For a person suffering from an eating disorder this often means that they re-interpret what people say to them. So instead of hearing the person say; "That is a nice dress you are wearing" you hear; "Shame, she can't fit into nicer

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clothing. I feel so sorry for her...so why don't I just tell her the dress is nice?"

God loves you just as you are

I realise that this might sound like a cliché...but trust me, it's true. In Psalm 139:13 we read: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." God made you, and loves you just the way you are. David also says that we were "fearfully and wonderfully made".

Now that might not help you feel great about how other people see you, but it is important to understand that if a perfect God deems you worthy, why should the opinions of other people matter?

Yes we want to feel accepted, significant and secure and that's ok, but if the yardstick that we use to determine what these things are supposed to be is the wrong one, we will end up looking for answers in all the wrong places. In other words if God says that you are so important that he sent Jesus to die for you and that he wants you in his family, it must mean that you have value. Now if the world says that you are worthless because of the way you look, you have to ask yourself who is telling the truth? Is it the God who made you or the world that lies to you most of the time?

Have faith in Him; let him carry your burden

Ok, so now you might start to believe that God loves love you and that you might be worth something. That still doesn't make it easy being you. You are still struggling with years of negative thinking as well as an eating disorder, but have you considered that you don't have to battle this problem alone.

For many of us it is hard to come to terms with the fact that God did not only play what is sometimes perceived as an abstract role in our salvation, but that he also plays a direct role in our lives.

You see, you can cast all your fears and all your worries and shame and doubt and self loathing onto Jesus. You can ask him to help you and can trust him to sort it out for you. You see you have the Holy Spirit, who is called the 'comforter' or the 'helper' who is there for you when you need him.

In Mathew 11:28-30 Jesus tells us the following: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus is telling us that he can help, if only we trust him. When we submit to Christ and take our problems to him, he will help us. In Romans 12:1 we read, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." (Message

ng was... food



Bible)

You should realise that God has given you a way out of your problems. It is no coincidence that Jesus refers to himself as the 'way, the truth and the life'. In him you will find the way to freedom from your problems, discover the truth about who you are to God and really get to enjoy the life God wants you to live.

When the apostle Paul says in Philippians 4:13 "I can do all this through him who gives me strength," he is not just talking about himself. He means you as well. You too can do all things because Christ strengthens you. When Jesus talks about faith as small as a mustard seed that can move mountains, he is saying that when you have the smallest amount of faith in him, he can move the mountain of self doubt and shame that you sit with. Through Jesus it is possible to be free.

Once I understood these things it dawned on me that the reason I failed trying to beat the battle of the bulge was because I relied on myself instead of God. Self-reliance was extremely exhausting and demoralizing. The moment I gave in to my weakness my eating spiraled out of control.

Submitting to the Holy Spirit

So I tried doing what the Apostle Paul said. At every meal, I gave thanks, not just the lip service that we often do out of habit, but truly thanked God for what he has done in my life. I thanked him that he loved me so much. I thanked him that I was made righteous because Jesus was righteous. I thanked him because to him I was extremely valuable and finally I prayed that he would help me so that I would eat only the right amount to stay healthy. I guess in a way I was making it a moment by moment prayer and a decision to love Jesus more than a second helping or a snack.

The first two weeks were the most difficult but the Holy Spirit didn't disappoint me. Every time I offered my food in prayer what followed was only what I can only describe as an uncharacteristic surge of confidence and power that was so liberating.

Yes there were times that I failed, but because I realized that I was free in Christ and he loved me no matter what, I no longer felt ashamed or guilty. Instead all I did was take the problem anew to God so that he could help and strengthen me again.

We often think of ourselves as sinners who are trying to become saints by doing battle with the evil and temptation in the world. But the reality is just the reverse. Once you accept Jesus as your Savior, you are reborn. You become a saint! You may sometimes fall back into old habits of the flesh, but that never changes who you are in Christ. □

Eternal life—is it only for a few?

“What about my friends and family who died in the Hindu faith and never heard the gospel message? Are they lost forever?”

This question was put to the pastor who had just delivered an inspirational message at a Christian business luncheon. Tears welled up in the eyes of the young lady as the answer came back with a resounding yes.

A small group of people who were present at the lunch walked into my office afterwards with mixed emotions, ranging from anger, fearfulness and confusion to disappointment. Does this mean that the endearing relationship she enjoyed with the family who loved and raised her, is lost forever?

How do we reconcile our understanding of a loving God who cares deeply for every person on this earth, with what some people believe—that the greater part of humanity is doomed forever, simply because the wonderful news of our eternal destiny in Christ never reached their ears? Yet, John 3:16–17 tells us, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

This particular passage emphasises the remarkable truth that Christ did not come to condemn the world, but to liberate the world. Yet, one may ask... would God not be condemning most in this world by allowing billions of its people to be excluded from the priceless knowledge that Jesus died for all, so that all will have the opportunity to respond to his amazing gift of salvation?

The extraordinary love of God towards all of humankind is highlighted in several passages of scripture. For instance we read in I Timothy 2:3–4, “God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,” and Titus 2:11, “The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.” In the latter years of his life, just prior to his exile to the Island of Patmos, the apostle John highlights the astounding truth that Jesus died for the whole world. He declares in 1 John 2:2, “[Jesus is] the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Everyone is included!

Some may wonder about the various biblical references to the few who embraced Jesus historically and respond to him now against the backdrop of some seven billion people living on the earth today. Matthew 7:13–14 tells us, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and

by
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only a few find it.” This and other passages refers to our present life in the world, where a smaller group of people has chosen to walk the more difficult path to salvation through Christ among the majority who live on the “broad road” that leads to destruction.

Not limited

It is important to realise that God’s sovereign purpose and capacity to bring people to faith in Christ is not limited to our physical mortality in the here and now. Jesus makes his intention to bring all people to himself clearly known in John 12:32 “I [Jesus], when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Daniel 12:2 refers to a time in the future when “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” This points to a future resurrection and final judgment when Christ will reveal Himself to all people, and all people will come to a knowledge and understanding of ‘Who’ he is. As free moral agents every human being will have a choice—to respond to the offer of a magnificent eternal future in Christ—or not. I believe the stark contrast of looking back at the indescribable consequences of living in

a fallen world, characterised by sin, pain and suffering compared to a joy filled eternal future in the Kingdom of God, will undoubtedly result in an emphatic ‘yes’ by most.

Think about our glorious future beyond the grave, when all who accept Jesus will be

raised incorruptible and receive an immortal spiritual body no longer tainted by the devastating baggage brought about by the fall. When the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. When death will be swallowed up in victory and God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

It is almost impossible for us to even begin to fathom the awe-inspiring depth and width and height of our gracious Father’s love for all humanity. The infinite God has not only sacrificed himself for the salvation of all people, but even more breath-taking, provides the opportunity for everyone to join the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in a delightful relationship forever. I was privileged to share these staggering truths with the group of concerned people who had arrived in my office with alarmed expressions on their faces. They were deeply comforted by the limitless love of our Almighty Father who earnestly desires to see each and every human being enter the Kingdom.

Imagine the overwhelming joy of the friends and family of this young lady when they meet up with their

“God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,”

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Do you pray to a God you don't believe in?

Whenever my daughter and I travel in the car there is always a huge tussle as to which song should be playing on the car stereo. My daughter considers my choice of songs as ancient and boring while hers is torturous noise to me. We keep pressing the button to switch songs throughout the journey and I fear the button on the stereo will soon fall out. Well that's the generation gap. I remember my own father being irritated with the songs that I loved to listen to and how we would end up quarrelling every time I played the latest hits back then. However there was one song my daughter was listening to that caught my attention, not so much the tune but rather the lyrics.

It's a song by the Irish band who call themselves 'The Script'. They have a hit song called Breakeven and the first few lines of the song are: 'I'm still alive but I'm barely breathing. Just prayed to a God that I don't believe in.' Those lines struck me as being rather interesting,

especially the line that says that he had prayed to a God he didn't believe in. How many of us are in that situation and have never realized it?

We are so ingrained with our traditions and culture and beliefs that we never question what we believe in. So many

people religiously carry out routines and rituals in prayer and yet come back to their problems and seek help from other means, sometimes in ways contrary to their religious beliefs. I have seen people so religious yet during times of serious problems seek help from the occult. Why is this so? Shouldn't the God you believe in be the source of all comfort and help? Shouldn't the God you believe in really *be* God? Do we believe in a God who is just a religious decoration for us or is he really a part of our lives? In other words do you have a real relationship with him or is he just a religious tradition that you hold on to?

Jesus Christ is more than real to me. He is my life. I not only know about him, I also know him. That statement might seem preposterous to many. But I gladly will testify or explain to anyone who asks me the reason for my faith. The bible teaches us to *always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks us*



by
**Devaraj
Ramoo**

*for a reason for the hope that is in us; yet to do it with gentleness and respect while having a good conscience.*¹ I believe in Jesus Christ because he is God.² That statement alone is vehemently denied by some but I defend it through scripture. He is God who became flesh and brought grace and truth to every human being.³ When he was killed on the cross he carried all my sins and the sins of mankind upon himself so that we may be free from the condemnation of eternal death. For our sake God the Father made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.⁴ Simply put, God the Father made him pay for our sins so that we might be set free. But that's not all. Our resurrection from death lies with Christ alone.⁵ I pray to a God whom I not only believe in but know will bring me back to existence from the grave at the resurrection. That's because he himself was resurrected from the dead after his crucifixion.



Either that's true or my entire faith is pure nonsense. I don't pray to a dead savior or dead prophet. Jesus Christ is alive today and very real. He responds to anyone who seeks him. Those who reached out to him have received salvation and grace.

Why do we go through so much pain and suffering in life and not seek the God who can really deliver us? Why are we afraid to even try? Now is not the time to hide behind fears and anxiousness about what others may say about us. Now is the time to embrace a God who is very real. Christ himself gives you an invitation.⁶ He promises to carry the burdens of those who are suffering and give them rest from the anxiety of spiritual emptiness. That anxiety includes praying to a god you don't believe in. You need to make the move to ask Christ to come into your life. He challenges you to try. The rest will be a miracle that you will experience for yourself. □

¹ 1 Peter 3:15–16

² John 1:1

³ John 1:17

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁵ John 11:25–26

⁶ Matthew 11:28–30

The upside down King

Powerful kings have always been known for their great pomp, ceremony and privilege, both at home and abroad. When they travel, large retinues of servants, clothes, special foods, and sometimes, even items of their personal furniture, go with them. All to make sure their royal environment is preserved even in foreign territory.

Kings and queens have to look like kings and queens if their royal majesties are to be recognized and honored in the ways they are used to.

But when the greatest king of all, God himself, came to earth as a human being, he did not come in mighty power and with all the attendant pomp and ceremony of human kings. He came in simplicity, in humble surroundings, identifying with the kind of people that most kings and queens never have a conversation with their entire lives.

Jesus could have arrived with powerful thunder and lightning, great displays of glory in the sky, endless parades of brilliantly arrayed angels, or some other kind of glorious celebration and fanfare unlike anything humanity had ever witnessed.

But he didn't arrive that way. Instead, he came into the world just like most of us do, with ordinary parents doing the best they could to provide food and shelter and pay the bills.

There was an angelic choir, but it appeared only to *one* group of average shepherds in *one* field. There were foreign dignitaries bringing gifts, but they had to be given special directions to even find the baby and his parents, and then sneak in and back out, without telling anybody they'd been there.

For most people, power and prestige are the highest goals of life. But in Jesus, God has given us what really matters—love, joy and hope—not an endless struggle for the outward glory that the world values so much.

Jesus turns our lives and values upside down. In him, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” He brings us true life, life rooted in knowing God for who he really is—as the One who not only made us,



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**



but who loves us and never *stops* loving us; as the One who redeems our lives and seats us with Christ at the right hand of the Father.

Jesus brought a new kingdom, a kingdom in which everybody matters, not just the nobility. He died and rose for *all*—rich and poor, noble and peasant, and everyone in between. Even you and me. □

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sister who had accepted Jesus and faithfully walked in his footsteps. Imagine your unspeakable joy when you find yourself re-uniting with friends and family who never knew Christ on this side of the resurrection. Remember, as free moral agents the decision to accept or reject this incredible gift of salvation is a personal

¹ 1 Corinthians
15:12–58

choice for every individual to make.

May I again suggest that the majority, including your loved ones, will say ‘yes’ to their future destiny in Christ. □

Engage!

When *Star Trek* Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS *Enterprise* points his finger at the view screen on the command deck and says “Engage!” the whole spaceship springs into action. The navigator sets the course, the engines come to life, the crew occupies their stations and the ship speeds away to some faraway destination and a new adventure. With that one word, a huge vessel and hundreds of people go into motion.

We use the same word to describe someone fully involved in an endeavor or a conversation. If you're engaged in conversation, you are in the moment with the person, looking in his or her eyes, listening intently and even physically expressing yourself with gestures and facial animation.

Being fully engaged in a relationship means being with the person in every way—mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. Sometimes relationships aren't easy, but we can understand how they work on the human level. With God, it's a bit more difficult. How can we be fully engaged with someone we can't see, hear or touch?

The usual methods of connecting with God are prayer, Bible study, meditation and the various other spiritual disciplines. But it's possible to do those things and still not be fully engaged with God.

If all we do is talk during our prayers and don't pause to listen, we might as well be talking to ourselves in a one-sided conversation. If we read the Scriptures without considering what God may be saying to us personally, it becomes a collection of interesting stories.

by
Tammy Tkach

If we see him as a casual observer in our lives, who only checks in occasionally to see if we are toeing the line, God becomes like a distant relative we don't know well and perhaps even fear. We certainly don't relish his visits.

Engaging with God in a meaningful relationship isn't a weekend thing or a morning quiet time encounter we forget about for the rest of the day. We engage 24-7 with him, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically (we honor him with our bodies, the temple of the Holy Spirit) as we get to know him better and grow in grace and understanding, which is a lifetime journey. That's why it's called practicing his presence. Some days we'll do better than others, but as long as our faces are set toward him, we'll be moving in the right direction.

The disciplines are still the foundation of spiritual formation. They help us learn to be continually aware of his presence. Our one-sided conversations turn into listening prayer, with times of silence and reflection. *Lectio divina*, an expanded way of reading the Bible (praying, reading, silence, journaling and more reading, silence and more prayer), turns our relationship with God into a deep meeting of the minds.

We don't have to worry about whether or not God is pleased with our progress. As a loving dad is happy with each baby step of his child, our heavenly Father is happy with our baby steps as well. His grace permeates everything we do and teaches us to be more fully engaged with him.

Engage! And may his grace be with us all. □

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miracles, allowing the Israelites safe passage to freedom.

If God can use a stick, He can use you and me

From Moses' example, and many other examples in Scripture, we see that God often fulfills His purposes by using ordinary people like you and me. Many of the prophets were ordinary men, as were the men Jesus chose to be Apostles.

God may invite you or me to participate in some specific way. The time may come when you or I have a “burning bush” experience—an awareness that God is prompting us to do something to further His Kingdom. If that happens, our God-given tasks undoubtedly will be small compared to Moses' assignment, but like Moses we may feel inadequate and balk, wishing that God use somebody else. But God can use us if we make ourselves available—He looks more for availability than ability, and it is a privilege to be His fellow worker. If that time comes, He will enable us to do what He asks.

- ¹ 1 Corinthians 3:9
- ² 1 Corinthians 1:26
- ³ Exodus 3:11

When I was first asked to write articles, I was reluctant. I thought “Why me?” But I tried, and now I enjoy writing.

Even now, we should ask ourselves what we can do to further God's work, perhaps not in a “burning bush” way, but in ordinary ways. Perhaps we can encourage people, give generously, perform music, teach, deliver meals to homebound people, or collect clothing for unfortunate school children. Some of us may have special gifts such as hospitality, carpentry, or preparing tasty food. Others may like to work in groups, such as the team of volunteers who organize, produce and mail this fine magazine. There are countless ways to help people, and when we help people, we follow Jesus' footsteps.

If God can empower Moses with a stick, He can empower you and me, regardless of our limitations. Let's not hesitate when we see opportunities to be fellow workers with God in little or big ways. □

Expedient indeed

Itell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I go away ...”¹

Jesus said it, so it's true—and the obedient disciple in me accepts it. But hasn't always understood it. What is it about the Master's departure that is expedient for his followers? Perhaps that's why he reinforces the concept by assuring us that it's true—because he knew we'd have difficulty with it at times. I sure have!

Surely this Christian walk would be much enhanced by having a walking, talking, flesh-and-blood Jesus around us for encouragement, teaching and exhortation. For us, “expedient for you” often does battle with “where are you, Lord?” In short, deep down, we'd really like to see, hear and touch him.

But the truth is, we do have his live, literal presence with us: his live, non-bodily presence—the one he calls “the Comforter”—the Holy Spirit—the one who not only walks alongside, living with us, but who also lives—literally—within us. Both with us and within us.

Our desire for Jesus' literal presence has been granted—his way, which is better than our way by about as much as heaven is over earth.² He has not left us bereft, like orphans. Despite his physical absence, he is nonetheless with us continuously, as he promised he would be, in the person of the parakletos, “the Comforter”—the non-bodily, yet literal presence of the Father and the Son who “come” to us and make their “home” with us.³

So, what makes all this “expedient” for us? What's going on that makes this the optimum arrangement?

Intercession!

Our merciful and faithful High Priest, personally experienced in the full range of human feelings, intercedes—having reconciled us with God. The Captain of our Salvation completes his glorious work in partnership—as one—with the Comforter.

At the right hand of the Father, he mediates in an intercessory role known to many as “justification”—the means by which we have been forgiven of our sins, our record clear, his own righteousness attributed to us.

He knows the Father's heart

What does it mean that Jesus “ever” (perpetual—at all times) intercedes for us? Many people unwittingly default to a mental image of the kind-hearted Son pleading each and every case before a stern-faced, reluctant Judge sitting with his arms folded and foot tapping impatiently, salivating at the chance to pass sentence. “Father, forgive him...”, “Father, forgive her...”, “Father, forgive...”, in an endless litany of anxious appeal, our lives forever tenuously in the balance. This grossly distorts the reality of God.

The Christ who said “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom,”⁴ is not busy trying to change the Father's



by
Kerry Gubb

mind about us. He knows the Father's heart, even if we don't yet.

It was the Father who sent his Son into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it—precisely because he loved it so much.⁵ The Father isn't reluctant, stern or cruel. He and the Son and the Spirit are eternally one, and that means they are eternally one in their love for and faithfulness to us.⁶

Jesus' intercession for us is not a torrent of impassioned pleas. It's implicit in his very presence at the right hand of the Father: our humanity is redeemed and glorified in him. He is our perfect substitute and representative. His being there is the fullness and wholeness of his intercession for us and the Father's acceptance of us on his behalf. The price of our salvation has already been paid, once for all time.⁷

Our redeemed humanity now sits in the very presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ, who in his life, death, resurrection and ascension has included us in himself as the beloved children of the Father. And all this is because of God's “great love for us,” because he is “rich in mercy,” and that's how he felt about us even when we “were dead in transgressions.”⁸

But there's still a “meantime,” isn't there? Forgiven, redeemed and included though we are, we still sin. So difficult, while still in the flesh, to live a life day-to-day, “down here,” that is completely in tune with what is already true of us “up there,” isn't it?

A grim reality ...

Except for the presence of the parakletos: the “Comforter alongside,” the invisible presence of Jesus Christ here on earth, where we really need him!

Concurrent with Jesus' intercession of “justification” in heaven, we have the Holy Spirit's intercession of “rectification” here on earth: with us and within us.⁹ The work of the Comforter is directed toward the same result: the complete fulfilment of our salvation. You might say that the Comforter helps us live life in the light of Christ's saving achievement.

What's going on in the Father's presence is a done deal. As Jesus completed his earthly work, he said: “It is finished.”¹⁰ That's what he meant. What's going on “down here” is a life of faith and hope, bridging the huge gap between what we still are in the flesh and the fullness of the done deal in heaven. What's already true in heaven is the source and reason for our resilience and endurance to fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith and receive the crown. And bringing all this together is parakletos, “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus Christ from the dead,” the one who lives in us and through whom the Father “will also give life” to our “mortal bodies.”¹¹

There's an interesting contrast between the way the ancient Israelite high priests did their work of intercession for the people and the way the book of Hebrews describes Jesus' finished work on our behalf.

I have talked with many Christians whose lives are like mine has been. I can't count the times that I have heard people describe a lack of fulfillment in their Christian life and then conclude that the answer was to get back in church, or witness more, or start tithing, or pray more, etc. Take it from a man who did all those things and still felt unfulfilled, polishing your performance is not the answer! Some of the most miserable people in the world are folks who are drowning in a sea of religious activity. The sad part of it is that they are absolutely sincere in what they are doing.

Steve McVey

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.

Edmund Burke

Real joy comes not from ease or riches



or from the praise of men but from doing something worthwhile.

Sir Wilfred Grenfell

There is too much tendency to attribute to God the evils that man does of his own free will.

Agatha Christie

He who knows no hardships will know no hardihood. He who faces no calamity

will need no courage. Mysterious though it is, the characteristics in human nature which we love best grow in a soil with a strong mixture of troubles.

Harry Emerson Fosdick

A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue but the parent of all other virtues.

Cicero

Who flew the kite?

"I did," said the wind!

"I did," said the paper!

"I did," said the string!

"I did," said the boy!

But in reality they ALL flew the kite! If the wind had dropped, if the paper had torn, if the sticks had broken, if the tail had caught in the tree, or the boy had fallen, then the kite would have come down! Each had a part to play.

Anonymous

When we are reading, we often find something that attracts our interest. It's not earth-shattering, or life-changing. But it's worth cutting out and keeping, or sticking on the refrigerator door; or maybe sending to us for this page!

We invite all our readers to contribute news items, quotes, or poems, that make you say 'Hmm'. It could be in today's paper, or in a book hundreds of years old. Try to send the original clipping, or a copy of the page to:

*Hmm... The Plain Truth,
P.O. Box 2043,
Pusat Bisnes Bukit Raja,
Pos Malaysia Bhd.,
40800 Shah Alam,
Selangor, Malaysia.*

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The ancient high priests did their work standing. "But," Hebrews 10:11-12 tells us, "when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God."

He sat down because his all-encompassing and eternal priestly work was done. "It is finished." What remains now is the life of faith. And parakletos has it covered. He's called "the Helper" in some Bible translations. But we need to understand something: The Holy Spirit is not the "tiger in our tank." He doesn't somehow supercharge our own efforts to walk this walk. He's not a tool we use. The fact is, he uses us. He guides us into truth,¹² and one with the Father and the Son, works with our conscience and ethical values, leads our thinking, brings our minds, intellects and hearts into line with God. Through the Spirit, Jesus even redeems and heals our weak

- ¹ John 16:7
- ² Isaiah 55:9
- ³ John 14:23
- ⁴ Luke 12:32
- ⁵ John 3:16-17
- ⁶ John 14:20
- ⁷ Hebrews 9:26
- ⁸ Ephesians 2:4-7
- ⁹ John 14:17
- ¹⁰ John 19:30
- ¹¹ Romans 8:11
- ¹² John 14:26
- ¹³ Romans 8:26

and limited prayers, offering them to the Father as his own on our behalf and in our stead.¹³

So the Father's answer to the Son's prayers in the Spirit on our behalf is always "yes." Not necessarily "yes" to exactly what we had in mind when we asked in weakness—but rather, "yes" to our prayers as they are redeemed and transformed by him through the Spirit.

And our part in all this?

Trust! Believe! Appreciate! Give thanks! In the love and grace of God be led and strengthened by the Comforter!

Just as Jesus said, it was expedient that he goes away that we might never be alone.

Expedient indeed! □

The Plain Truth Magazine



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