

THE Plain Truth

MCI (P) 125/05/2017

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Oct - Dec 2017

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

ISSN 1675-3100



9 771675 310008

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A personal invitation from Jesus

Jesus spoke to a large crowd saying, “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.”¹ This has been called “*the grand invitation*.”

Let’s take a look!

Jesus is inviting you and me

He calls out to all who are weary and burdened. That’s *everyone* at one time or another during their life—accidents, financial setbacks, or unexpected health problems. We all feel burdened at times and seek relief. If you are like me we also get weary of work, difficult relationships, unconquered sin, world problems, remembering past hurts, feelings of guilt and other concerns.

Taking Jesus’ yoke

A yoke is a wooden bar attached to the necks of a pair of work animals, enabling them to join together in unison to pull a load. Yokes are heavy, a burden in themselves. At first glance, Jesus’ invitation doesn’t sound like relief—if we are already weary and burdened, why add another burden? But his yoke is “easy.” The original Greek word means “excellent, useful, pleasant or kind, well-fitted.” He is speaking of genuine relief, a more comfortable and worry-free state of mind, often described as “spiritual rest.”

Jesus offers to lighten our loads by being yoked together and pulling with us—a side-by-side relationship. By being yoked with him, he shares our burdens, and even more—he guides us where he wants us to go.

He invites you and me to submit our wills to his good, acceptable, and perfect will and let him lead us. That can be a challenge—we naturally want to live our lives the way we want to, making our own decisions.

The choice is ours. We can accept his invitation, or ignore it. But when we yield to him, great is the reward. Yes, he will lead us to circumstances we need for our spiritual growth, not necessarily what we want, but where we *should* go. I can look back on my life, including some difficult times, and see his leadership was for my ultimate good. As King David said in Psalm 23, he leads us to “still waters” or restful places of calmness and peace, here and now and in the life to come.

Learning from him

Part of his invitation includes his call to learn from him—the source of all wisdom. Our role is to be humble, teachable



by
Paul Hailey

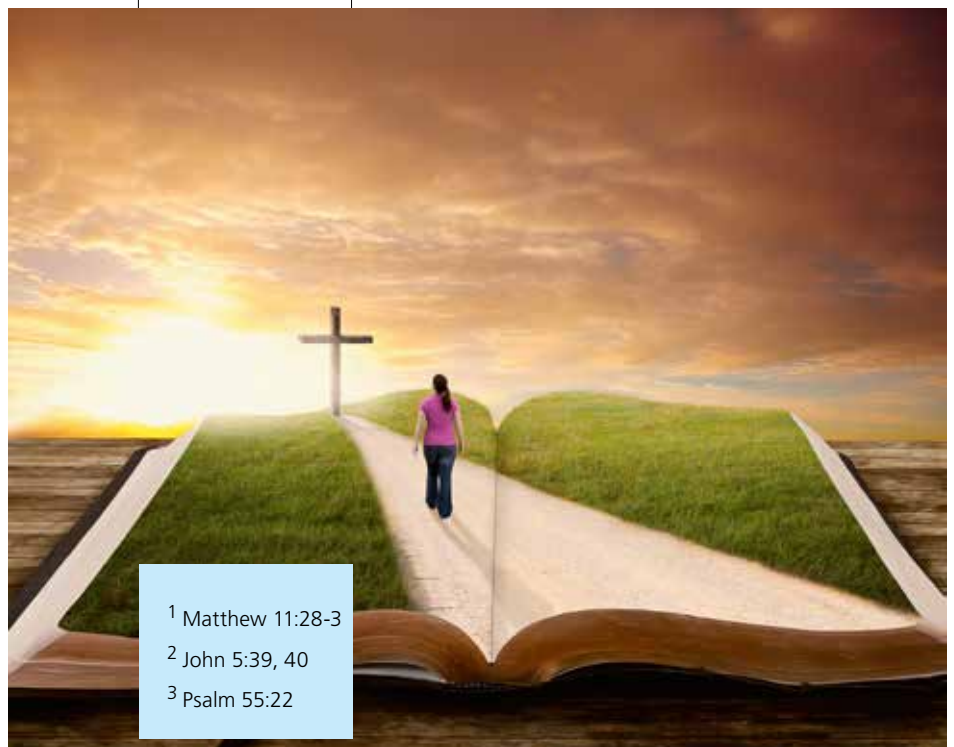
students. I find it delightful to learn from him—always something new and fascinating. He teaches us through Scripture, not just direct quotes of what he said in the Gospels, but in all Scripture including the Old Testament. When Jesus addressed some Jewish leaders who were opposing him, he said, “You diligently study the Scriptures (the Old Testament) because you think that by them you possess eternal life. *These are the Scriptures that testify about me.* Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”² We also learn from him when we hear inspired messages from pastors and Bible teachers, and through fellowship with other Christians.

When we learn from him, we are blessed, amazed and thankful to understand the fullness of his love, mercy, and grace for everyone.

Experiencing Jesus’ rest

We don’t have to accept his invitation. It is our choice. But what a joy to do so! He brings comfort when we are troubled. King David knew this well. David was often seriously distressed, but gained relief when he turned his thoughts to the Lord. “Cast your cares on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.”³ Jesus’ rest can be ours when we accept his invitation to put on his yoke. Truly his yoke is “easy.”

Heavenly Father, please grant us humility to get beyond our tendencies to be self-sufficient and to welcome Jesus to share in our burdens, to follow his lead in our lives, and to eagerly learn from him. We pray in Jesus’ name, amen.□



¹ Matthew 11:28-3

² John 5:39, 40

³ Psalm 55:22

THE Plain Truth

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding



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Issue No. 8

Volume No. 22

Oct - Dec 2017

PP 12578/03/2013 (032108)

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The Plain Truth is published four times a year as funds allow, and is sponsored by Grace Communion International, which is a member of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia. It follows a non-denominational editorial policy and provides a message of practical help, hope and encouragement from a Christian perspective. - For Non-Muslims Only -

DONATIONS: Although we do not put any subscription price for The Plain Truth, we gratefully welcome donations from readers who support our desire to bring spiritual knowledge and understanding to our fellow brothers and sisters. Cheques should be made payable to 'The Plain Truth' and mailed to the postal address listed above.

Printed in Malaysia by:
Hin Press & Trading Sdn Bhd (71078-D)
No. PT 45855, Batu 2, Jalan Kapar,
41400 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia

ISSN 1675-3100. Copyright Grace Communion International, 2017.

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What our readers say:

Dear Editor, I have a question on your article titled "I am making all things new!" in the Jul-Sep 2017 issue. I don't see how the verses in Acts 13:37-38, 1 Corinthians 5:17, 1 Timothy 2:5 and Hebrew 10:12 support your statement "He [Jesus] was man, is man, and will be man forever." I need an explanation!

Thomas Manuel
Bagan Serai, Perak

Ed: The Word (which became Jesus) was God, is God, and will be God forever. He will always be the second member of the Godhead/Triune God. When Jesus assumed humanity 2000 years ago, he also took on human nature. Thus he has both divine and human natures - two distinct natures. He is fully God and fully man. As God, he came to reveal what God is really like (to correct people's wrong ideas about God). He loved people, forgave them, gave them hope, and gave himself to them. That is what God is really like. Seeing (knowing) Jesus is seeing God. As man, representing humanity, he loved God and fellowman. And he did that perfectly as man, on our behalf, in our place, as us. Thus, in his dual role as God and man, he brought God to man and man to God. That is what Immanuel, God with us, really means. That is how he united God and man forever. Jesus is truly the meeting place of God and man. The verses listed simply tell that Jesus' humanity continues on into eternity. This is because he had to be a Mediator between God and man forever. Hope this answers your question.

Thanks for sending the Plain Truth magazine regularly. This issue (Jul-Sep 2017) contains encouraging articles. We attach herewith our receipts of contributions for you to meet your expenses in making this magazine available to everyone. Jesus blesses your ministry.

Julie and Goh

A big "thank you" to the Plain Truth editorial team and praise God for initiating such a magazine of Christian understanding. Its simplicity and truth helps us to a better living. It lights up and brightens our path. I have gained much from reading it. While it is given free, readers should contribute in order to sustain its circulation. I strongly believe it is better to give than to receive. Enclosed please find a cheque for this vital ministry and may God Almighty bless your ministry richly.

Low Cheng Chye
Penang

Ed: Thank you for supporting the Plain Truth ministry. You never know how many lives your contributions will touch.

I'm truly blessed by this ministry. May the Lord use it to bless many others.

Charles Wong
Kuala Lumpur

The Plain Truth is very informative and easy to read and understand. I find the articles

very useful in my Christian walk. I share the magazine with my colleagues and relatives. I have been reading the magazine since I became a Christian several years ago. Please renew my subscription. Thank you.

Philip Dodwell
Singapore

It strengthens family bonds and gives us a better understanding of each other. It helps us understand God better and the articles have touched us. We read them aloud to our children. A million thanks to the Plain Truth.

Rene A Colond
Singapore

The Plain Truth gives information about spiritual life and I learn a lot from it. I read from page one to the last page because the articles are interesting and meaningful. Thank you for sending me a copy of every issue without fail.

Anthonyamah Joseph
Batu Gajah

The Plain Truth is very informative, the articles are interesting, a joy to read, and simple and straight forward. It exposes truth from fiction.

Michael Ovinis
Johor Bahru

The articles help me understand the bible better and I can learn from the experiences of others. It also helps me to better interpret the bible.

Lim Yiam Sui
Kuching

I am very impressed with the magazine which I used to read from my friend's copy. I wish to have these copies for myself too. Please send me the magazine. The topics discussed are relevant to day-to-day issues and it strengthens our faith.

Mary Vincent
Taiping

The Plain Truth has filled my spiritual needs. It has quenched my thirst for the word of God. It has lifted my soul. It has been beneficial to me and my family members and friends.

McLean Kula
Kota Kinabalu

I must say here that I thoroughly enjoyed reading the Plain Truth and found it to be illuminating and enlightening! Your team of editors and contributing writers are simply wonderful! And God-inspired! They must be filled with the Holy Spirit in order to come out with such wonderful articles. So keep on writing and may God bless your ministry.

Josephine Mark
Johor Bharu

I read with interest the Editorial titled The Good News in the Sep-Nov 2014 issue. It is surely the Gospel as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:2. He claimed that everyone had received, stands, and are saved by the Gospel. He goes on to say in versus 3

and 4 that the Gospel is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The greatest and the best news for mankind is that Jesus died for us, was buried for us, and rose again on the third day for us. If we identify with the Gospel, we too must die, be buried, and rise again with him as a new creation empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Pastor P. Samuel

Ed: Thanks for sharing your thoughts. What we are saying is that we were co-crucified, co-resurrected and co-seated with Jesus Christ. We were baptised into his death and raised to life in his resurrection. We are also saying that Jesus came as our representative. He died as us, buried as us, and rose as us, and lives in us as us. It's truly profound and breath-taking, but that's the true Gospel message.

The Plain Truth has enlightened me on many issues. It has also brought me out from the tunnel of ignorance into our Lord's Love, Grace and Compassion. Thanks for a really great magazine. Enclosed is my contribution towards the furtherance of your mission in God's work.

Chia Thien Soon
Kemaman

The articles are written in a simple, yet truthful manner. Such a magazine is a gem in today's secular world. After when we have finished reading it we pass it on to our friends. Thank you for the magazine.

George Menezes
Kuala Lumpur

Although THE PLAIN TRUTH is sent free of charge, it is not without cost. Each copy is made possible by the generosity of others. So we are very grateful for those readers who send a donation, and make it possible for us to continue to publish the good news of the Gospel. Donations should be sent to the addresses listed on page 3 or sent electronically to the bank account:

The Plain Truth
A/C No: 8001-8514-59
CIMB BANK BHD
Jalan Dato Hamzah (Branch)
12-14 Jalan Dato Hamzah
41700 Klang,
Selangor, MALAYSIA.

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or sent via electronic mail to:

ptasiamy@gmail.com

The editor reserves the right to use letters so addressed in whole or in part, and to include your name and edit the letter for clarity and space.

Christmas Light

"In him was life, and that life was the light of men" (John 1:4)

Brilliant displays of light and color are part of the Advent season. For some people, such displays may be little more than another advertising gimmick of modern retailers. But for believers, they can be another reminder of the glory of the One and Only Son of God, the light of the world, who brings the peace and rest for which the whole world aches and pines.

In the days when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, there was a devout old man called Simeon living in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. One day the Spirit led Simeon into the temple courts — the very day that Jesus' parents brought in the infant Jesus to fulfill the requirements of Torah.

When Simeon saw the baby, he took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."¹

Light to the Gentiles

Simeon praised God for what the scribes, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not comprehend: Israel's Messiah was not for the salvation of Israel only, but also for the salvation of all peoples of the world. Isaiah had prophesied it long before: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."²

Jesus: the new Israel

The Israelites were the people of God. God had called them out from among the nations and set them apart through a covenant as his own special people. He did it not merely for them, but for the eventual salvation of all nations.³ Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, but their light had gone out. They had failed to keep the covenant. But God is faithful to his covenant regardless of the faithlessness of his covenant people.⁴

So, in the fullness of times, God sent his own Son to be the light of the world. He was the perfect Israelite, who perfectly kept the covenant as the new Israel.⁵ As the prophesied Messiah, the perfect representative of the covenant people and the true light to the Gentiles, Jesus delivered both Israel and the nations from sin and reconciled them to God.

Through faith in Christ, giving our allegiance to him and becoming identified with him, we become members of the faithful covenant community, the people of God.⁶

Righteous in Christ

We cannot muster righteousness on our own. Only

by
J. Michael Feazell

as we are identified with Christ the Savior are we counted as righteous. We are sinners, no more righteous in ourselves than Israel was. Only when we see our sinfulness and put our faith in the One through whom God justifies the wicked can we be counted as righteous for his sake.⁷

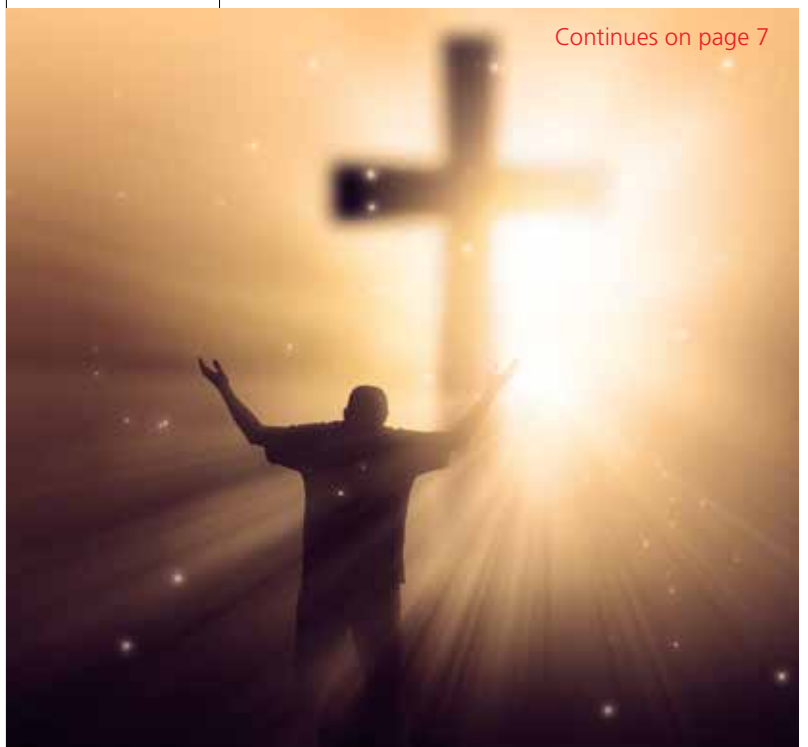
The church needs the grace of God as much as Israel does. All who put their faith in Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, are saved only because God is faithful and good, not because we have been faithful, or because we have found some secret formula, some "right" doctrine or the "right" church. "He has rescued us," Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13, "from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Trust in Jesus

As easy as it might sound, it is hard to trust in Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means putting your life in his hands, and that means giving up control over your life. That is not easy to do. We like to be in control of our own lives. We like to call the shots, make our own decisions and do things our own way.

King Ahaz of Judah was no exception. Ahaz rejected the sign God gave him for deliverance, for salvation, for peace. He had his own plans about how to best save the nation.⁸ God has a long-range plan for our deliverance and security, and he has a short-range plan. But, like Ahaz, we cannot receive

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The Victory of Weakness

We gathered around a table recently with friends and shared a simple meal of bread and wine, reminiscent of another twelve friends who sat around a table of communion. There are so many beautiful thoughts around the communion meal and how, when we consume the message it communicates, it becomes part of our reality.

What a tumultuous time this is for them as they share their last meal with their dear friend and Messiah. How tensions are rising around them.

Jesus' life and message and everything He represents is offensive to the 'powers that be' - culturally, religiously and politically. He seeks love and justice for the entire community and especially for those most likely to be treated unjustly. He has faced hostility and violent threats all His life (even at birth Herod set about slaying every young child in and around Bethlehem). Tensions are now rising and about to reach a crescendo where the powers would join forces to snuff out and silence this designated scapegoat. (Crucifixion has a political and military purpose: to silence and deter rebels.) The disciples are urgent for justice to be enforced and for the powers to be shown that this Jesus is the Messiah and He will rain down upon His enemies and spare His own. Peter has even shown his allegiance by pulling out his sword in his master's defense!

Before we continue around the table with our friends again it is significant to realize what such a meal would represent in the past.

Feasts like these were held to celebrate victory over one's enemies – deliverance from the foe.

We have examples of such celebration feast throughout history – such as Marduk killing his mother Tiamat in Enuma Elish and our countless biblical accounts of victory feasts after successful battles such as Exodus. There was also a certain social hierarchy around these feasts – typically the elite, the chosen, the 'elect', were able to attend. Even the seating was important. They were feasts celebrating violent bloody victory.

Now back to our disciples preparing for this thanksgiving feast, with Passover playing out in the background their expectation is for their cause to be justified and Jesus to be the victor!

Jesus takes the elements – the bread he breaks and gives to them... **"this bread is MY body, broken..."** Now it is way too close to home...for He is going to be violently broken, murdered and betrayed – sacrificed. This does not sound like victory! They will be part of this violent process, but also at the same time if they

by
Mary-Anne Rabe

will see and take it in, they will partake of the self-giving love that will sacrifice Himself to put an end to all sacrifice.

Then **"Drink my blood,"** which will be drained for you, but unlike the blood of Abel, which calls from the ground for vengeance and retribution, my blood pours forth forgiveness and reconciliation, it speaks of better things! (Hebrews 12)

What becomes clear in this ritual is that we have all participated in 'breaking' the victim's body. We are all part of a cyclic history of bloodshed and there seems no way out. But here the cycle is broken and a new way of being human is introduced. We no longer celebrate the destruction of enemies, but the restoration of friendship.

So our Communion meal is totally subversive and undermines our religion of sacrifice, confronting us

with a whole new worldview where God is present even with the victim and the only valid sacrifice is giving ourselves in love to one another. Unless we eat and drink of Him, the true light, come into the world, we do not have life...we have no clue who we are and how to live. Jesus turns the tables on all victory feasts... here in the 'Last Supper' He institutes a ritual of memory and hope while sharing a meal with his friends... where the divine presence is present in a meal.

I was so blessed by a chapter in 'Compassionate Eschatology' by James Brennenman, where he explores amongst other examples, the Great Banquet parable in Luke, who many believe wrote his gospel to persuade his readers to reject violence and believe in the peacemaking lordship of Christ. All the reasons given by those not attending the banquet e.g. I've just got married, I've bought land...were all acceptable reasons for you to be excused from your military duty of going to war. It seems like Jesus particularly uses these because His audience would get that He is referring to a victory banquet and then when all of the invited guests have made their excuses not to attend, He says, go and invite the poor, the crippled, lame and blind. Let them all come to the feast.

Our Lord does not win His battles by making victims and by force, He wins by making His enemies friends, by turning victims into honored guests at the table.

"Sharing the bread and the wine becomes a sacrament only to the degree the actual living body of Christ lives in community as one united people. At



the table of the Lord there is no rank and file: priests are not distinguishable from laity, the poor and the rich eat together, there are no doctors of philosophy above the high school dropout, no saints who weren't also sinners needing God's grace! In a world structured mostly around social, economic and other forms of power, such a meal is good news indeed." (J Brenneman)

I loved reading about Virgil Michel, a monk from the 1800's the other day. He always emphasized the connection between liturgy and social justice.

"As long as the Christian is in the habit of viewing his religious life from the subjectivist and individualist standpoint, he will be able to live his daily life without any qualms of conscience..."

He saw a renewed sense for liturgy, one that would incorporate worshippers into the mystical body, uniting them with Christ and with all those who share his life, as the best way to break down the barrier between the sacred and the secular...

He who lives the liturgy will in due time feel the mystical body idea developing in his mind and growing upon him, will come to realize that he is drinking at the very fountain of the true Christian spirit which is destined to reconstruct the Social Order."

I'm reminded of another 'communion' as the men walk on the road to Emmaus. So here they are, struggling with their interpretation of the events that have just transpired. They too expected a victorious Messiah to enforce justice, but He dies as a victim through our injustice. But the risen Jesus shows up and reinterprets their story and in a simple meal where the guest

becomes the host, breaks bread and pierces through their confusion, He reveals not only a new way of seeing Him, but a new way of seeing themselves. Something happens when they recognize the divine presence with them, but in the instant they see – the visible becomes invisible and the invisible becomes visible IN THEM. The stretch across the table is too far for the Word made flesh.

Such a beautiful picture of how our living Savior is so ready to manifest among us, through us, in us at any moment and as we break bread together we remember and we have an opportunity to perpetuate this self-giving love as we serve others.

Let us break bread together, not just as a symbolic meal, but one that we can share with one another across social and economic boundaries – always remembering that in taking in His brokenness, we can make whole, as we drink in the pain, we can reach out and heal and in His forsakenness, we can welcome the forsaken into a feast of love.

The message of the risen Lord is, I am love and I am here and I am ready to show up at any moment through you. Let us be a community where we find ways of seeing the best, believing the best.

[Here are two books that blessed me around these thoughts...

1. The Forgiving Victim by James Alison
2. Compassionate Eschatology Essays from about 15 theologians. Specifically chapter 6 by James Brenneman titled War, Peace and the Last Supper.] □

Continued from page 5

the fruit of his plans if we do not stand firm in faith.

Some people, like King Ahaz, stand firm in military might. Others attempt to stand firm in financial security, in their personal integrity or their personal reputation. Some stand firm in their skill or their strength, their ingenuity, deal-making or intelligence. None of these things is bad or sinful in themselves. But as humans we are inclined to put our confidence, energy and devotion into them instead of in the real source of security and safety and peace.

Walking humbly

When we commit to God our problems, along with the positive action we take in dealing with them, and trust in his care, provision and deliverance, he promises to be with us.

James wrote, "Humble yourselves before the Lord."⁹ God calls us to put aside our lifelong crusade to defend ourselves, promote ourselves, preserve our possessions, protect our reputations and prolong our lives. God is our provider, our defender, our hope and our destiny.

The illusion that we can get our own lives under control must be exposed to the light, to Jesus, "the light of the world."¹⁰ Then we can rise in him, becoming who we really are — God's own precious children whom he saves and helps, whose battles he fights, whose fears he calms, whose pain he shares, whose future he secures and whose reputation he preserves.

- 1 Luke 2:29-32
- 2 Isaiah 49:6; cf. 42:6-7
- 3 Isaiah 49:6
- 4 Romans 3:3-4
- 5 Romans 5:18-26
- 6 Romans 3:27-30
- 7 Romans 4:16, 22-25
- 8 Isaiah 7:1-17
- 9 James 4:10
- 10 John 8:12
- 11 1 Peter 5:7
- 12 1 John 1:7
- 13 Luke 2:11
- 14 John 1:9

In giving up all, we gain everything. In kneeling, we rise. In setting aside our illusion of personal control, we are clothed with all the glory and splendor and riches of the heavenly eternal realm.

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you," Peter wrote.¹² What oppresses you? Your sins? An enemy? A financial disaster? A crushing disease? An inconceivable loss? An impossible situation that you are utterly helpless to do anything about? A disastrous and painful relationship? A blackening of your name? False accusations?

God has sent his Son, and through his Son, he takes our hands and lifts us up and shines the light of his glory into the dark and painful crisis we are enduring. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because he is with us. "If we walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

God has given us the sign that his rescue is certain: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."¹³

Everywhere we look during this season, it seems, there is decorative lighting — white lights and colored lights and lit candles. In these physical lights we can enjoy a dim reflection of "the true light that gives light to everyone."¹⁴□

Total Surrender – Give It Away



Common wisdom says surrender is for fools:

- It's the antithesis of strength and control
- It's what wimps do
- It's the last resort after you've tried everything else
- Common wisdom says you must "hold the rope or die"—do not surrender to weakness!
- It says never give up on your dreams and your goals—never surrender them!

Well, that's what the world says. But according to Scripture, surrender is for the truly wise:

- It's not an act of the will, but a letting go of willfulness
- It's the calling of every Christian
- It's the final letting go of the idolatry of self
- Scripture says that surrender to God is the only way to freedom
- Ultimately, surrender is about letting go of attachments
- It's more than just a one-time act—surrender is a way of life

by
Dustin Lampe

Let's face it, we will all surrender to something or someone, but to what (or who) do Christians surrender? In this sermon I'll assume we all have surrendered to Christ—but can we learn more about what that means and how to live it out more fully?

What is Surrender?

Perhaps a story will help answer this important question:

A man was traveling and found a precious diamond, previously undiscovered. He put it in his pocket and kept it. One day another man comes up and asks the man for the diamond. Upon request, the traveler gave the beggar the diamond. The beggar departed overjoyed that he had been given the virtually priceless diamond. However, after a few days, the beggar returned in search of the traveler and gave him back the diamond. He entreated him: "Give me something much more precious than this rock. Give me that which enabled you to give the diamond to me."

That, my friends, is what surrender looks like. Both the traveler and the beggar surrendered. Like the traveler, we all have accumulated a certain

amount of precious things, be they material, emotional, academic, etc. Like the beggar, we all have grasped these things, holding them tightly. But perhaps like the beggar and the traveler we have learned to surrender to the greatest gift of them all—the *gift of surrender itself*.

Let's think about surrender in the light of the below three questions:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. To what are we clinging?
3. How do we see people?

Let's take them one by one.

Who is Jesus?

Let's reread our Gospel passage, Matthew 16:13-20.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say, John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Here is a call to awareness. We all need to be aware of who Jesus is and the authority he possesses. There are various theories about the identity of "this rock" Jesus mentions here. A likely explanation is that it's Peter's confession as to Jesus' identify as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. This confession is the "key" that opens access to the kingdom, and Peter is leading the way.

What is clear from this passage is that Jesus, as Messiah and Son of God, is in charge—he is the key and Peter's calling (one we share) is to loosen his grip on the things of earth so he will be set free to grab hold of the things of heaven—Jesus himself.

We have a tendency to want to make things difficult. Unlike Peter, we don't just confess that Jesus is Messiah and Master and leave it at that. We want to go out and conquer. We want to win and we want to be right. Therefore, at times we need to pull back and realize the bottom line: Our principal calling is to surrender to Christ, to his perfect will; to confess who he is: "Lord, you are God and I am not!"

But we don't like letting go of the things we hold tight to. We cling to man-made ways of achieving salvation, deliverance, happiness. Chief among them are man-made religions, but it certainly doesn't stop there. It almost always includes the idolatry of self. We like to tell Jesus that we have things under control—"I'm my own Messiah, thank you Jesus—you need not worry about me, I can take care of it." No spirit of surrender here—just self-protective, self-justifying idolatry!

To what are we clinging?

What are we holding in our tight grip? A desire for acceptance? A desire for control? Permission to harbor unforgiveness (it sometimes feels good to refuse to forgive others, it keeps them indebted to us!). But to the extent we hold onto things like that, we will lack the ability to hold onto Christ, our true source of spiritual power, deliverance, healing and salvation.

Let's read again the first part from the Epistles:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.¹

The command here is to "be transformed." But what does that mean? Sometimes (often?) this passage is used as a call to effort: "Work hard at transforming yourself!" "Get to work, be more disciplined." Well, we are called to participate in the work the Spirit is doing in us to both call us to Christ and conform us to Christ. And so our will, our effort is involved. But just as we are *justified* by grace, so too are we *sanctified* (transformed) by grace—both are gift of God that we receive by surrendering to Christ—letting go of what we're holding on to and grabbing hold of him!

The gift of transformation by the spirit comes to those who surrender to the Spirit. This is made clear in Romans 12:4-8 where the Spirit, as part of what is he doing to conform us to Christ, gives us gifts for ministry. Note also in Romans 12:3-5 the emphasis on surrendering self in order to love others, and that leads us to our third question.

How do we see people?

As we know, the greatest command is to love God and love people. The question now is this: *How do we see people?*

God, who is a triune communion of love, has created us in his image. Therefore we, like God, are relational beings—wired for relationship. We are in constant relation to other people, whether we are near them or not. Agree with them or not. Love them or can't stand them.

If we are to understand surrender and how we're doing with it, we must take a step back and look at how we see people, because this most definitely ties in with how we see God and his call for us to surrender.

There is a Chinese story of an old farmer who had an old horse for tilling his fields. One day the horse escaped into the hills and when all the farmer's neighbors sympathized with the old man over his bad luck, the farmer replied, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

A week later the horse returned with a herd of wild horses from the hills and this time the neighbors congratulated the farmer on his good luck. His reply was, "Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?"

Then, when the farmer's son was attempting to tame

¹ Romans 12:1-3

one of the wild horses, he fell off and broke his leg. Everyone thought this very bad luck. Not the farmer, whose only reaction was, "Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?"

Some weeks later the army marched into the village and enlisted every able-bodied youth they found there. When they saw the farmer's son with his broken leg, they passed him by.

Was that good luck? Bad luck? Many things that seem to be evil may be good in disguise and vice versa. Thus we are wise when we leave it to God to decide what is good luck and what is bad, and thank him that "all things turn out for the good for those who love him."

Think about this story of the old farmer—I hope you find it greatly freeing. We can get caught up in all kinds of complications, scruples, legislations. Sometimes it's good to shake all that off and hear the simple command from Jesus: "Love God and love people." And when we think about the consequences related to this command (obedience or disobedience) once again we are set free, because in thinking of ourselves soberly and realizing our humble limitations, we aren't being asked to do it perfectly. We aren't called to solve the problems of mankind. That is not our burden. We are called to do our best and leave the results to God.

How will things turn out from there? Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?

In our relationships with God, people and self—we are most fortunate when we surrender the consequences of our decisions in our relationships with others and don't cling to any preconceptions about the results.

Conclusion

What do stories about diamonds being held loosely, and farmers walking simply, mean for us today? Is this just rhetoric to throw on the flames of the fires of contemplative people? Is this mere philosophy? Or do these things matter in your real, everyday life?

Many of the basic cycles you are caught in whether you are aware of them or not (cycles of worry, anxiety, fear, anger, unforgiveness, seeking control), hold us prisoner if you cannot look at them and address them asking the three questions our readings today has bid us ask:

1. Who is Jesus? Will you run to him, confess him, trust him?
2. To what are you clinging? Will you loosen your grip on the "stuff" of life binds you to be free to grab hold of Jesus?
3. How do you see people? Do you see them as complicated messes outside of God's superintending care? Will you surrender to him and to his will and join him in loving people unconditionally, the way he does?

A final thought here: you cannot surrender by an act of your own will. Surrender too is a gift of God's grace. It's one often received in stages. So take a deep breath, ask God for the gift, and receive it with an open heart. And don't be in a big hurry—surrendering typically means being "actively passive." Grace and time are essential. God is not in a hurry.

Prayer

Loving Father, I surrender to you with all my heart and soul. Please come into my heart in a deeper way. I say "yes" to you today. I open all the secret places in my heart to you and say, "Come on in." *Jesus*, you are the Lord of my whole life. I believe in you and yield to you afresh as my Lord and Savior. I hold nothing back. *Holy Spirit*, bring me deeper conversion to the person of Jesus Christ. I surrender all to you---my health, family, resources, occupation, skills, relationships, time management, successes and failures. I release it all to you and let it go. I surrender my understanding of how things ought to be---my choices and my will. I surrender to you the promises I have kept and the promises I have failed to keep. To you, Holy Spirit, I surrender my weaknesses and my strengths. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.□

Entanglement and the Resurrection

I'm so glad our faith is not dependent upon scientific fact, but upon a God who reveals Himself. Science, no matter how complementary it is to our faith, is not meant to prove our faith, or be the basis of our faith. However, it can most definitely confirm our faith. There are many great resources and youtube videos that explain the science behind 'entanglement' or 'non-locality' in detail. This is not the purpose of this essay. Following is a very basic explanation of it: If two electrons that originate from the same source are entangled, one of these electrons can be sent to the other side of the universe, but somehow they will still be connected! Do something to one, and the other electron responds instantly. This has already been proved experimentally over distances of more than 100 km.

We know of nothing that travels faster than light, yet there is proof of a dimension that connects objects without any restraint in space or time. One scientist described it as follows: Gisin speculates that some "influence" may be affecting both experiments coming from "outside space and time." Gisin says he means by this that "there is no story in space and time" to account for non-locality. In reality these electrons are still entangled...or connected. Everything has a common origin and so, in reality everything is still connected... is still touching!

Another strange fact of this sub-atomic world is that even the act of observation changes the state of what is being observed. So what does all of this have to do with the resurrection of Christ Jesus? Well, Adam, the crown of creation, through one act of disobedience, entangled all of reality into a downward spiral of decay and corruption.¹ The only One who knew the original parameters and state of all creation is the Originator, the Creator. In Christ Jesus, God becomes entangled and intimately connected with His creation. He is absolutely consistent...the decay and the effect of the fall does not change Him...He changes it! His incarnation, His entanglement with our reality, is the beginning of the "reconciliation of all things" as Paul words it in Colossians 1:20. Paul describes the extent of Christ's entanglement with creation as follows: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist."²

But the explosive event of the resurrection is where the true power of this entanglement, this connection with creation, becomes most visible. This is the birth of the new creation. This is where God manifests Himself in such clarity and purity, with the affect that everything connected with Him, immediately changes state and direction. As Adam entangled all of creation in a downward spiral of decay, the resurrection of Christ entangled all of creation. He changed the direction and

by
**Andre and Mary-
Anne Rabe**

of "the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end."³

What is our contribution to this new creation? Well, long before we knew that observation changes things, the scriptures said: "... we continue to behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are constantly being transfigured into His very own image."⁴

What we perceive, changes what is seen.□

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¹ Romans 8:20

² Colossians 1:15-17

³ Isaiah 9:7

⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:18

A new way

Tired of life? Bored of your mediocre, humdrum, and mundane existence? Many are, so don't worry, you are *not* alone!

How about trying an alternative lifestyle – a *new* way of being? This new way of being human can radically transform your life. It will change the way you see God, yourself, others, and the creation. It can help you live the adventurous, dynamic, and joy-filled life you were created for.

This article tells you how you might live that *here* and *now*!

At the start of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel!"¹

Let's unpack this verse:

- The time is fulfilled – meaning, it is *now*, not in some distant future.
- The kingdom of God is near – meaning, here, not in outer space or some distant galaxy. Jesus represents the kingdom and he has sent his Holy Spirit to be present with us today.
- Repent – meaning, *change* your mind about God, yourself, others, and the creation.
- Believe the gospel. Jesus is the Gospel. Believe what he says about *God*, *Us*, *Others*, and the *Creation*.

We will weave and discuss these points in the rest of the article.

Change your mind about God

Many embrace false or mythical ideas about God. They see God as a stern judge, keeping track of all their sins and waiting to punish them on the day of judgement. They see him as demanding, controlling, revengeful, unforgiving, stingy with blessings, and indifferent toward their struggles, pain and suffering. On a more positive note, they might see him as one who will bless them in their next life if they behave well now.

They are not alone. Even God's prophets, priests and disciples felt that way at times. They blamed God of being unfair and unjust. Job, for example, accused God for afflicting him when all he was trying to do was please him. Why would a good God do this to him? Only when God confronted Job, he confessed that he didn't know God. Similarly, Jonah was displeased with God's kindness toward the people of Nineveh who were his nation's enemies. King David likewise called on God to destroy his adversaries. Jesus' disciples too wanted to zap the Samaritans for not letting them pass through their land.²

Don't we sometimes accuse God, albeit silently, for not answering our prayers, for being indifferent toward our suffering, for being stingy with his blessings, and for blessing those who do evil?



by
Dr. P. Sellappan

False ideas about God affect our relationship with him. We alienate ourselves from him, especially when we have done wrong, or have been unfaithful to him. We dare not approach his throne and share our lives with him. Thus, we forfeit the peace, joy, forgiveness and fellowship that he offers us.

But when we see God as our loving Father, Friend and Confidant, we naturally want to share our lives with him. When we know that he has forgiven our sins (past, present and future) and has declared us righteous, we appreciate his kindness, compassion and mercy. When he tells that he created us in his image and likeness and has adopted us into his family as his beloved children,



we are filled with gratitude and thanksgiving. When he tells that he has freely given himself to us and shares all things with us, we adore and worship him. In short, seeing God as he truly is radically transforms our relationship with him.

Change your mind about yourself

Many have wrong ideas about themselves. They see themselves only in terms of what they have or possess, or what they have done or accomplished, not who they are in Christ Jesus (children of God).

We live in a put down society. Our family, relatives, teachers, employers and neighbours, have put us

of being

down. And we too have put others down. When people belittle us, we feel inferior and worthless. And we grow up believing the lie that we are useless. So we withdraw and hold back. We stifle our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development. We dare not meet new people and get to know them. We dare not follow our passion, take risks, and venture into new possibilities. So we achieve less and contribute less than what we are capable of. That makes the world a little poorer.

In our inferiority complex, we might even blame God telling, "Why do you make me like this? Why didn't you bless me like the others?"

But how does God see us? He sees his own image and likeness in us. He sees us as his sons and daughters.



He sees us adorable, valuable and worthy. He sees our unique beauty and personality. He believes we can use our unique gifts and talents to enrich the lives of others. Such a view radically changes the way we live. We learn to love ourselves, believe ourselves, and excel in everything we do.

Change your mind about others

Sometimes, we have wrong ideas about others. Without knowing people, we judge them as mean, proud, jealous, or unfriendly. We form negative opinions about others. However, when we do this, we are indirectly maligning another person made in God's

image and likeness. We ask, 'Why God, did you even make him/her like that?'

We sometimes attribute peoples' sufferings to their sin, which is *not* always true. Jesus corrected his disciples who held this view. For example, he told them that the man who was born blind was *not* born that way because of his or his parents' sin.³ Similarly, he told them that the Galileans who had died at the hands of Pilate and the 18 who had died when the Tower of Siloam fell were no greater sinners than the rest. He admonished them saying, "No! Unless you repent (change your mind about suffering) you too will perish."⁴

Seeing others as God sees strengthens our bond with them. We relate to them more kindly and affectionately. Seeing them as brothers and sisters helps us love them, honour them, respect them, and appreciate their unique personality, gifts and talents. It helps us to form endearing relationships.

Change your mind about creation

Insurance companies typically attribute natural disasters to 'Acts of God', which is not true. In our greed, we destroy huge areas of green lungs, depleting the oxygen level needed to support healthy living. We pollute seas by dumping plastic, chemical and other toxic wastes to the detriment of the sea creatures. We overdevelop cities without proper planning and environmental assessment, causing flash floods and air and noise pollution. We consume far more than what we need and thus add to the massive disposal problem. Then we blame God for the global warming, extreme weather patterns, massive floods, landslides, droughts and crop failures.

God created a good earth, but we didn't take good care of it. When we realize how dependent we are on the environment, we want to take care of it by applying good agricultural/ecological principles and practices.

Live like God

Many wish they could live like celebrities who have fame, power and wealth. But we can do better – we can live like God!

Sin is spiritual blindness.⁵ Jesus came to remove our blindness and show us a new way of being. He assumed our sin and abolished it on the cross. Then he rose from the grave to give us new life. We are now a new creation,⁶ hidden in Christ.⁷ This new life calls for a new lifestyle. This new way of being human is to live like God!

This new way of being is to live like God! After all, didn't God make us in his image and likeness to mirror him? So how do we live this life?

The Triune God is our model. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit love each other and give themselves to

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There is always hope

There is no darkness so heavy that God's light and LOVE cannot dispel it, no matter what your situation is. Circumstances may feel hopeless, and God may seem far away, but we can take comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our pain. The God who made us, who formed us in our mother's womb; this God who knows the number of hairs on our heads and who stores our tears in a bottle feels our pain and suffers with us. He NEVER leaves us or forsakes us. Immanuel, God with us (by His spirit) understands, feels, and knows, because we are NOT separate from Him. We are in Him, and He is in us.

As beings made in God's image and likeness, and co-heirs with Jesus, our brother, there is no space between us! There is no one on earth that exists apart from having God's divine attributes as a part of their very own being. God is our Father, and we are His off-spring. God is NOT out there somewhere sitting on the rim of the universe, but as close to us as our own hearts that beat

by
Patricia Pollock



within our chests. We too, are such a part of Him, so much so, that we are like a child in its mother's womb who cannot really see its mother because of being utterly enclosed, safe within the sanctuary of her being.

And, even as a child in the womb is IN his/her mother, so too is his/her mother within the child. This is proved true when the child is born and members of the family, friends, and neighbors come to visit and say, "he/she has their mother's eyes and curly red hair, etc.

If faith is the assurance of things we have hoped for, and the absolute conviction that there are realities we have never seen as it says in Hebrews 1:11, and if we trust that the Lord knows the hopes of the helpless and pays attention to our cries for mercy and comfort, as it says in Psalm 10:17, perhaps we can also be assured that the God of HOPE will fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in His goodness and abide in His LOVE... remembering that God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above all that we ask or think (Ephesians 3:20). □

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each other withholding nothing. The Father (Lover) loves the Son (the Beloved) and the Son receives His love and returns it. The Holy Spirit (Love) is the bond that binds them all together in one love!

God is love. Love is his essence. All that he does are acts of love. *His being and his actions are inseparable. What he does is who he is, and he is what he does.* All of his power, wisdom and knowledge emanate from his love. And he uses them to draw humanity into his circle of love and friendship.

To live like God is to love God, ourselves, others, and the creation. We love God when we are mirror/reflect him. When we love others and serve them, we are living like God. When we recognize others as our brothers and sisters, we are living like God.⁸ When we take care of the environment, we are living like God. So no matter who we are, or what situation we are in, we can live like God. Living like God is not the exclusive privilege of a few.

What is the price tag?

What is the price tag for this new *life*, this new way of being? Simply put, it is losing our old, boring, mundane life, and *receiving* God's joy-filled and glorious life!

Jesus gives us the formula: "If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it. He repeats: "Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it."¹⁰

He is asking us to renounce our archaic formulas for success that have us striving, grasping, comparing, competing, boasting, controlling, and accumulating. Instead, he asks us to embrace his radically transformative way of *love*, which is seeing others as our brothers and sisters and serving them.

Is this really possible?

Jesus tells us: "With man this *new life* is impossible, but with God all things are possible."¹¹

Jesus lived a perfect human life. This same Jesus, who is now resurrected and glorified has made his abode in us, and by his Spirit ever lives to help us live this *new life*. By his Spirit, he makes it possible for us to live this new life *here and now!*

Just before his death, he assured his disciples that he would come and indwell them: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."¹²... The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things..."¹³

We cannot live this new life without Christ's Spirit indwelling us. Apostle Paul tells us: "*Christ in you* is the hope of glory." With his indwelling power inside us and with his love flowing in and through us, we can live this new life, albeit a process. We can love people, even our enemies, as Jesus did.

Apostle Paul tells us: "For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are *complete* in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."¹⁴ He tells us that the God who began the good work in us will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."¹⁵

So is it possible to live this new life, this new way of being? God tells us we can, with Christ's indwelling presence in us. May Jesus' indwelling presence inspire and energize you to live this new life. □

- 1 Mark 1:15
- 2 Luke 9:54
- 3 John 9
- 4 Luke 13:1-5
- 5 John 9:41
- 6 2Corinthians 5:17
- 7 1Corinthians 13:12, 2 Corinthians 4:18
- 8 Matthew 25:34-40
- 9 Matthew 10:39
- 10 Luke 17:33
- 11 Matthew 19:26, Mark 10:27
- 12 John 14:15-16
- 13 John 14:26
- 14 Colossians 2:9-10
- 15 Philippians 1:6

Something Truly Surprising...

Are you open to something truly surprising or have past experiences conditioned you to expect nothing more than what you are already familiar with?

Obviously we are meant to learn from our experiences, but the wisdom we gain from them should not close us to the possibilities of the future. It would be a tragedy if past disappointments become the boundaries of future expectations. And this is important, for expectation is not simply our best effort to foresee the future, but to a large extent it determines our future experience.

Our expectations are formed under the influence of many factors – some conscious, some unconscious:

- past experiences,
- the reality of our present circumstances,
- our beliefs.

Taking all these factors into account, it might seem that the future is largely determined. The logic of cause and effect narrows the options before us.

Yet a very significant factor is often left out of our calculations:

- the possibility that our experiences have no knowledge of,
- the possibility that our beliefs do not yet acknowledge,
- the possibility that is by its very definition larger than the present reality.

This possibility is what I call God. It is a possibility beyond our logic of cause and effect. Jesus spoke about this God when he said “for God all things are possible”, Matthew 19:26. Or another way of translating it is: “God is the possibility of all things.” This is the God of novelty; the God who beckons us moment by moment to transcend the boundaries of what is and what has been. Something truly new and truly beautiful is possible for you. If you experience the excitement of what this sentence means – a meaning beyond the words – then you are experiencing God.

So what can we practically do to make room for divine possibilities?

Create space for the unplanned

Very often plans are made in order to reduce unpleasant surprises. These plans are often motivated by a desire to be in control. An unintended consequence of such plans is that they also exclude the possibility for pleasant surprises. Being in absolute control can also be absolutely boring.

Yes, some plans are good and necessary, but learn the art of leaving space for the unplanned, for surprising creativity.

by
Andre Rabe

Practise spontaneity

Whereas plans usually are aimed at reducing the risk of the unknown, spontaneity embraces the risk and excitement of seizing the moment. In a world where everything seems to have its place and time, it can be a surprising joy to do something... unexpected. It might start with something small, but continue to look for those opportunities.

In Greek mythology the god Kairos was pictured as a fast running athlete with a lock of hair on his forehead. It was said that he moved so fast that you could only grasp him as he ran towards you ... the moment he passed it was too late. And so Kairos was used to symbolize opportunity.



Form a habit of meditation

There are different practices of meditation and some might be more comfortable referring to it as listening to the voice of God.

I want to highlight the benefit of daily meditation. Again, it might be much easier for some to set aside some time for prayer and fasting once a year to 'get the plan' from the Lord and then stick to it. But I have experienced his voice in a much more dynamic way and hope you could benefit from such an experience as well. Sure there are times when God may speak to us about long term future directions, but by far the voice of God is much more relational and in the moment.

I remember when Mary-Anne and I started traveling and ministering all over, I sensed the Lord say: "Do not plan for more than three months." This was against everything in my nature. I wanted to be certain about

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First things first

King Solomon noted “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...”¹ He mentioned times to be born and to die, embracing and refraining from embracing, planting and harvesting, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, being silent and speaking. Life *does* bring a variety of situations, each calling for different responses.

Solomon understood the value of using time wisely. This can be challenging for us in our hectic world—job pressures, commuting, household chores, shopping, paying bills, family time, and more. On top of that we may be frustrated by traffic jams, frequent interruptions, noisy neighbors, disturbing news, political turmoil, threats of terrorism and disasters.

But as Christians we should strive to use our time wisely.

Our number one priority

Jesus knows we must earn a living to provide our necessities, but he told his disciples, and you and me,



by
Paul Hailey

when we discuss our plans and concerns with God in prayer, we often can look back and see that He *did* direct our paths in ways that yielded better results than we had planned or hoped for.

Finding balance

The King James translation of Ephesians 5:15-16 used to bother me: “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, *redeeming the time*, because the days are evil.” “Redeeming the time” seemed to me to imply we should make the most of every moment—*always* being busy doing something productive and noteworthy. Thankfully, that is not true. In fact, extreme busyness can bring on stress, anxiety, ill health and reduced productivity.

When we put too much emphasis on accomplishing something, even if it is worthwhile, we may not give enough attention to more important activities. “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.”⁴

God does *not* expect us to be super busy all the time. Unfortunately, extreme busyness is a status symbol in some societies. “I don’t have enough time” is a frequent excuse for not studying Scripture, building relationships, exercising or getting enough sleep, in spite of common knowledge that overwork contributes to poor health.

I find a simple verse in Micah to be refreshing and comforting. “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” “Walking humbly with God”⁵ implies being careful and wise, using time as God would have us, not in a minute-by-minute, highly-structured way, but being relaxed and worry-free, trusting Him to guide our paths.

For some of us, balanced use of our time may mean more time with God. For others it may mean getting more sleep, rest, recreation and leisure, or more family togetherness. Jesus, our example, took time to find solitude and private prayer, even when crowds anxiously sought him. God intends for us to rest from our labors and take time to enjoy life. Entertainment can be a wonderful way to rest from the struggles of life.

I benefit by following general priorities—prayer and Bible study, work, family time, rest, recreation, exercise, reading, fellowship, and helping others. I enjoy sitting with my wonderful wife watching television. We enjoy traveling, going to a coffee house for a nice drink, time in a gym for exercise, serving in church, strolling in our community, and just sitting outside. I enjoy weekly hikes with a good friend—it is refreshing and reminds me of God’s magnificent creation. I also belong to an organization that serves our community in several meaningful ways.

My days feel relaxed, complete, generally worry-free, even if I don’t accomplish all that I had hoped to.



to not worry about food and clothing and storing up wealth. He then gave us our top priority, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (life’s necessities) will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”²

We seek God’s kingdom through Bible study, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, and living the kind of life Jesus wants us to. We should *always* set aside time to focus on God—it gives us direction, and brings inspiration, refreshment, and peace of mind.

Our Heavenly Father gives an incredible promise. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”³ It’s true—

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Humanizing humanity

by
Greg Williams

In my many travels with Delta Air Lines I often read Delta's Sky magazine (typically doing the crossword puzzle first in an attempt to exercise my mind!). On a recent flight, a particular article caught my attention. It highlighted the movie *Born to Be Blue*, in which actor Ethan Hawke portrays fabled blues trumpeter Chet Baker. Hawke is quoted as saying that Baker's biggest struggle after a drug dealer knocked out his teeth was "to play and to play great again." Noting the movie's primary goal in telling Baker's story, Hawke made this comment:

"Some biographies paint [Baker] as the angelic-type figure, some have these deep-in-a-drain drug themes, and some paint him as a criminal. Everything about the guy, even his death, was mysterious. We're just trying to humanize him."

In many ways, Baker's story is the story of all humanity. We all were born into a fallen world, and yet, as noted by the apostle Paul, we all have hope:

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Though the *Born to Be Blue* writers and actors were

unable to fully humanize Chet Baker (or anyone else, for that matter), we need not be discouraged, for "humanizing humanity" is what Jesus has done because it is who Jesus is. Out of his deep love and rich mercy, Father God sent his Son to us when we were "dead" due to our "trespasses and sin"—walking around like living corpses (zombie fans will relate!). All of humanity was in this "living dead" state when the Son of God moved into our neighborhood by becoming one of us.

We refer to this astounding miracle and amazing gift of grace as the Incarnation. It's the focus of our Advent-Christmas celebrations when we give thanks for Jesus' birth, which heralds the coming of the Son of God into our state of death (alienation) to grant us true, everlasting life. Amazing grace!

The grace "package" addressed by Paul in Ephesians 2:5 reminds us that we have been made alive by Christ. No longer are we lumbering corpses because Christ has redeemed us—Christ has re-created humanity by becoming one of us to unite us to his humanity. And Christ, in his now glorified humanity, is seated on the throne of heaven (and thus Paul can say that we are seated there with him—his union with our humanity is permanent). This grace package thus speaks to the humanization of humanity accomplished by the one who created us and saved us by sweeping us up into his very life. Jesus, the one truly "human" human, by grace, has humanized us all!

When the second member of the Godhead willingly emptied himself to take on the form of a human being, a plan was set in motion established by the Triune God before the creation of the world. That plan was for the Son of God to become the Son of Man to enable us all, God's created sons and daughters, to become the humanized, fully adopted children of God that now, in Christ, we truly are.

During the Thanksgiving-Advent-Christmas season, I hope you'll join me in reflecting on the beauty and mystery of the Incarnation, including Christ's birth in Bethlehem. As we do, let's thank God for sending Jesus who, in redeeming us as one of us, made us truly human! □

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Taking opportunities

The verse in Ephesians about "redeeming the time" no longer bothers me. The NIV translation reads "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, *making the most of every opportunity*, because the days are evil." The implication, at least for me, is on taking opportunities to do good deeds. That in turn implies having some available time to take advantage of opportunities as they come--*not* on being constantly busy.

- 1 Ecclesiastes 3:1
- 2 Matthew 6:33, 34
- 3 Proverbs 3:5, 6
- 4 Proverbs 19:2
- 5 Micah 6:8

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we seek your guidance in putting your kingdom first in our lives. Open our minds to see how we can use our time more wisely. May we remember to come to you with our plans, cares and concerns asking you to direct our way. Please make us aware of opportunities to serve others as Jesus did in his life here on earth. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen. □

Conversion - Befriending otherness, so that we can be born again... and again...

Does conversion happen only once in our lives, or can we be born again... and again? What are we being born again... and again into, if not LOVE itself? Here in the West, it seems that my Christian religion primarily defines conversion as faith in Jesus; His life, death, and resurrection as God's son. Furthermore, it emphasizes that change can happen as we live lives proving that we believe, and indicates that we can know we have been converted when we are sinning less and less, and as we are becoming more and more righteous. Since otherness is defined as: the quality or state of being different or distinct, perhaps we can be converted into more inclusive ways of loving 'others' as we realize that in both small and big ways, we are all 'others' to someone. Perhaps there is something in 'the other' that I am being invited to explore, something God knows I desire, long for, and even need! But, unless I am willing to invite a deeper conversion, and to not only see the me that 'the other' sees, rather than feeling afraid or threatened by our differences, it's NOT likely that I will move towards others, but away from them!

There are a myriad of ways we may devalue 'otherness.' I am using the terms 'other' or 'otherness' in both an unbiased way, as a means of focusing on what is obviously different, but also as a means of drawing attention to a sometimes less conspicuous, but often more complex system of devaluation. We simply may forget that ALL humans are made in God's Image and Likeness by either over emphasizing our differences or under emphasizing our sameness; by our inability or refusal to see our similarities and connection, or what makes us each distinct from one another. We may ignore the voices of others, either by way of speaking, or of being heard because they represent a viewpoint we don't agree with, thus rendering them powerless. We aren't apt to notice the many occasions we are given for conversion until we understand that our truest identity is found in our common humanity, and until we begin to value ALL humans as equal to ourselves. Only then, can we begin to feel less threatened and antagonistic, and more receptive and loving. 'For everything we know about God's word is summed

by
Alyson Sousa

up in a single sentence: LOVE OTHERS AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF!" (Galatians 5:14 MSG)

My Christian faith CANNOT genuinely represent 'The Way' of LOVE... if it doesn't move me towards others, and propel me more deeply into what it means to be a human who loves more inclusively and universally. Saul was a Pharisee among Pharisees, and a devout man who believed he was doing God's will when he set out to destroy anyone he might find belonging to 'The Way.' These followers of 'The Way' lived lives of forgiveness, enemy love, and generosity. We can read of these, and of the profound conversion of this very religious man in Acts, chapter 9. When Jesus revealed Himself



by a blinding flash of light, he spoke to Saul and asked him, "Why are you out to get Me?" So really, it was revealed to Saul that he was not only persecuting these followers of 'The Way.' He was also persecuting Jesus! And in revealing Himself, Jesus wanted Saul to TRULY see and know that to persecute 'others' is to persecute 'Me!' Furthermore, when Jesus shares the parable of the sheep and goats

in Matthew, chapter 25, He shares with His listeners in verse 40; "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, THAT WAS ME- YOU DID IT TO ME!" (MSG)

Conversion can also be about TRULY seeing... and awakening over and over again... to the wonder and beauty of 'otherness,' of a willingness to joyfully enter into the everyday opportunities we are given to be converted to; new ways of seeing, other ways of relating, greater degrees of understanding, having more empathy and compassion, humility and forgiveness, and solidarity and unity. In being open to this 'Way' of LOVE we develop the capacity to actually enjoy our differences. We are willing to invite further engagement, and to come awake to the possibility that there might actually be something in 'the other' that God wants to share with us! Even when we encounter relational difficulties, an ongoing desire for conversion might make us more willing to struggle to see and hear

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Are you at peace?

When I watch my colleagues come in to work everyday I often notice their countenance that tells me instantly if their thoughts are preoccupied with disturbing problems. Some would walk past you without greeting as they are so immersed in their thoughts that they hardly notice your presence. Life today with all its complexities can drain our strength and leave us exhausted and worn out. Many of my older colleagues and even those much younger have opted to retire from their jobs as they could no longer handle the pressure. Family problems can also be quite draining and eventually some individuals fall ill with hypertension and other health conditions. Usually there is no way that one could ease the pressure by their own efforts. Eventually this leads to outbursts of anger, contentions, alcoholism and even violence.

On one occasion I witnessed a shocking scene on my way home from work. A man driving a van made an illegal U-turn suddenly. The cars behind had to brake immediately and the drivers honked at this van driver for being so irresponsible. What happened next was unbelievable. The driver of the van, a large burly man, got out and began screaming at the other drivers, even threatening to kill them. It was a horrible sight seeing this man in such a rage and if the other cars had not driven off quickly this man might have carried out his threat. What was more disturbing to see was inside the van where the man's wife sat timidly and frightened at the sight of her husband behaving this way.

People today have serious mental health issues. There are literally hundreds of human time bombs waiting to explode at the slightest provocation. The sad part is that many teenagers are also affected. In schools bullying cases are increasing. Those teenagers suffering from deep mental distress are releasing their anger on other innocent teens. A recent case involved a group of boys beating another to death simply because they didn't like the way he carried himself. Once they started the beatings, they couldn't stop themselves. There is also a lot of abuse happening in families. Sometimes the abuse is verbal. There are those who relish insulting and demeaning others verbally. Some people even have to



by
Devaraj Ramoo

leave their jobs due to continuous verbal harassment. With all our technology and modern lifestyles we have forgotten that all this is worthless if we have no peace in our heart, mind and soul.

Why are so many people suffering mental health problems? Shouldn't life be pleasant with all that is available at our disposal? The fact is that we have drowned ourselves with everything except that which brings peace and tranquility to our lives. We have failed to develop a relationship with God. Christ came to the Earth with an open invitation. He knew that humanity would become saturated with grief and anguish. He willingly gave himself for mankind by taking our sins and freeing us from eternal death through his sacrifice on the cross thereby enabling a relationship to manifest between us and God. He extends his hands out to us, lovingly inviting us to come to him to find rest and peace for our souls.¹

The peace that Christ extends transcends human concepts of peace. We might define peace as a situation in life where there are no more burdens, sufferings, war and violence. But the peace that Christ extends is one that remains in the depth of our being under any circumstances. It is a peace that frees our heart from being troubled and afraid.² It is a state of being that comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the comforter from God. This is a peace

that remains in us even in the midst of sufferings, persecution and trials. It is a peace that transcends all human understanding. How is this possible?

The peace that Christ gives is not what the world seeks. This peace is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and therefore divinely heals our minds and hearts.³ It is a peace that enables us to suffer wrong without desiring to harm others. It enables us to also bring peace to others by our comforting words and deeds. People are in great need of this peace that Christ provides. If you are greatly troubled by everyday issues or personal problems, addictions and stress, seek the Lord Jesus Christ. Talk to him through prayer and ask for his peace to fill your soul. He is ever willing to listen and respond. You need not suffer mental anguish. It's time to let go and let Christ.[□]

¹ Matthew 11: 28-30

² John 14: 27

³ Galatians 5: 22

Bottomless Refills

At brunch recently, a friend of mine joked to the waitress about the restaurant's advertised "bottomless refills" on mimosas (cocktail), asking her just how "bottomless" they really were? She informed us that the most she'd seen someone drink was ten mimosas. It got me thinking: ten mimosas isn't really bottomless, it's just ten mimosas. No one enters the restaurant expecting to actually drink an infinite amount of mimosas. Why? Because of everything from our height, to how fast we can drive on the interstate, to how many mimosas we can drink, we live in a world defined by limits. But God doesn't.



by
**Dr. Joseph
Tkach**

By definition, he has no limits. He wouldn't be God if he did! But sometimes we fall into the trap of treating God like we treat a "bottomless drinks" sign at a restaurant: we think, "That's not really what that means. Of course there are limits." Maybe we choose not to talk to God about something important, because we've already prayed a few times today, and we don't want to bother him. Or we're afraid to ask for his mercy or healing or power in a given situation, because we already have so many times before. But that's not what God wants out of a relationship with us. He created us – he knows that we have limits; that is why he makes his whole limitless self available to us! Jesus tells us to, "Come to me, all who are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,"¹ and Peter tells us to, "Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you."²

Of course, because we live in a fallen world that still waits for Christ's coming Kingdom, our experience of our limitless God will still be limited. We can still fail to fully understand things. We can still run out of energy, patience, and time. We can't change the fact that here and now, we're still limited creatures.

But in Christ, we're offered a kingdom which knows no bounds – and we're invited to participate incrementally more and more in God's limitless glory, character, and being, for all of eternity. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ can and will give us a foretaste of the Kingdom that awaits us. Just think about that: the power of the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father, and the grace of the Son, are all ours for the asking! Sounds like an infinitely better deal than "bottomless" refills, doesn't it?□

¹ Matthew 11:28

² 1 Peter 5:7

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the other's perspective, so that we might each grow together into a deeper understanding of what it means to LOVE!

One of Jesus' primary ways of relating to people was by sharing parables, where He would describe and draw attention to common everyday realities, and then invite His listeners to not only be those who look at, but those who SEE THROUGH! This way of communicating allows for questions and dialogue, and can keep us open to 'the other' while still providing enough space for us to really listen and hear their heart. When we are willing to listen non-defensively to others, to their stories, even if we think differently, or don't agree, we can become more loving as we resist feeling afraid or threatened by our distinctions. A relationship of respect, mutuality, and friendship may develop as we are open, and as we begin to understand that perhaps one of the most profound ways that we are converted into better ways of loving is through these others who are also made in God's Image and Likeness. We grow in humility when

we vulnerably share our stories with others, and we are evangelized to become more loving humans when we are willing to ask, "How do you perceive me?" We are given an opportunity for a deeper conversion as we listen, and as we are reminded that we all have some pollution that we don't see. I have come to believe that it is often these others that God speaks and moves through, people who help me see and understand some of the pollution I hadn't noticed in myself!

What might happen in this world if we lived our lives expecting to find and experience JOY in the discovery of 'otherness?' Perhaps conversion happens when we stop polarizing, when we stop splitting the world and 'others' into goodies and baddies! Perhaps something novel, something brand new can happen as we awaken to the possibility of LOVE in 'the other.' Perhaps satisfaction and joy in living are found in the struggle to discover 'otherness' so that 'the other' becomes a whole universe to explore!□

Where did Martha go?

When Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen the better thing and it wouldn't be taken away from her, many assume Martha slinked back to the kitchen, tail between her legs, duly chastised. The exchange in Luke 10 has often been used to characterize Martha as a whiny, petulant woman with a bad attitude. But is that the truth? Perhaps Martha has received a bum rap all these years and deserves another look.

by
Tammy Tkach

God. She could have said this only if she had spent time sitting at his feet, absorbing not just his words, but him and who he was and is. This is a different Martha from the sweaty faced, frustrated one we saw earlier.

We next see her in John 12. It is six days before the Passover and Jesus, along with Lazarus and the disciples, is again in Bethany, at a dinner in his honor. Again, Martha is busy serving. But this time, she doesn't seem to mind doing the work alone. I have an idea she was in full agreement with Mary's beautiful act of worship as she anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.

Martha had three recorded conversations with Jesus and in this first one in Luke 10:38-41, all we know about her is she was busy preparing a meal for Jesus, her brother Lazarus and perhaps some or all of the disciples. In those days, cooking, baking and serving a meal was a lot more work than it is today. It's understandable she felt overworked and abandoned by her sister, who was supposed to be helping her. I've been in that situation—well, not serving Jesus and the disciples, but slaving away in the kitchen with no help. Did she go back to the kitchen or did she join Mary at Jesus' feet?



The second time we see Martha is in John 11. Lazarus was sick and Mary and Martha sent word for Jesus to come and heal him. Knowing of his powers as a healer, Martha confronts him in verse 21 about why he didn't come earlier, and then in verse 27, she states that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of

Something had definitely changed in Martha's heart and mind. She seems to have matured and grown as a result of her time with Jesus. As she watched and learned, Martha became a theologian! Her theology had formed while she listened to Jesus and discovered his true identity. And that's what theology is all about, isn't it – "the essential business of faithful reflection on human life lived consciously in the presence of God" (*Invitation to Theology*, Michael Jenkins).

Where did Martha go? She went to Jesus. And that's where we need to go—straight to him, to sit at his feet and not only to learn from him but also to learn him. Then we will also be able to say, with the conviction of our whole hearts, "I know you are the Messiah, to son of God." □

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where we would be, what we would do and whether we could afford it. However, learning to be in conversation continually opened up opportunities that I could never have planned for. Possibilities and relationships that were not even imaginable for me at the beginning of the three months would present themselves and I was so glad that I did not exclude them because my schedule was already full.

Plan to do and experience something new

It is easy to fall into the habit of only doing what you are familiar with and convincing yourself that you are simply not good with certain activities. But just as our physical muscles do not develop if we do not use them, so too, neurological development ceases if we do not exercise our brains. In his book 'The brain that changes itself', Norman Doidge shows that learning something new, something challenging, activates neurological activity: "When we learn something new neurons fire together and wire together."

The research suggests that learning something new and challenging keeps the brain elastic... and makes life so much more exciting!

Conclusion

Whatever your story is, whatever path brought you to this moment, the most exciting part of your story is the fact that it is unfinished. The most exciting stories are full of surprises, full of twists and turns.

God is the possibility that opens up your future beyond the pattern of your past, beyond the logic of cause and effect. Allow this God to stir your expectation. Something truly new and truly beautiful is possible for you. □

The key question: Who is Jesus?

Review 5 of James B. Torrance's book:
Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace

by
Ted Johnston

In Review 4 we looked at the wonder of God's grace seen in the dual mediatorial role of Jesus. JB continues this discussion in chapter three with the vital observation that in theology, our "dogmatic starting point" must be the question, "Who is God? Who is Jesus Christ?" Unfortunately, that often is not where we begin, focusing instead on the "utilitarian questions of 'how.'" JB elaborates:

In our pragmatic Western society in this technological age, our starting point so often is the problems of the world, of church and society---problems of race, the inner city, unemployment, poverty, violence, injustice. These are issues of such urgent importance that we give primacy to the question of how to solve them. We can too readily assume that Christianity is meaningful, useful, relevant, even true, only if it is seen to offer solutions to practical problems. We can too readily subsume theology... under the category of means and ends.

This problem, according to JB, "is widespread in our churches today," He continues:

[As churches, we] can be so preoccupied with the problems of humanity, of society, of individual need or problems of the self, that we see the gospel exclusively in terms of these issues. *We adopt an anthropological starting point*, and then seek to justify religion in terms of its pragmatic value or relevance for our contemporary self-understanding---offering programs, structures, organizations, machinery to deal with these problems and the countless calls for action. It is as though by doing something, becoming more efficient, we will be successful and find solutions.

Despite the pressures of these pragmatic concerns, JB pleads with churches not to give primacy to the "how" questions in formulating their theology and the practice that flows from it. Instead he pleads with them to emphasize first the "who" question. In this plea, JB is emphasizing a truth that was taught by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (to whom JB often refers):

Throughout the Bible, the indicatives of grace always precede the imperatives of law and obligation. It is only as we know who God is and what he has done and is doing that we can find appropriate answers to the question of *how*, and then see the incredible relevance of the gospel in every area of life.

This truth has great significance for our understanding of worship. Worship of God (involving such things as church attendance) is not about *what* it does for us. As JB notes, "We worship God for God's sake" not our own. "We come to Christ for Christ's sake, motivated by love." And that encounter with God, transforms us as we are drawn into the love and life of the triune God. JB elaborates:

An awareness of God's holy love for us, revealed in Jesus Christ, awakens in us a longing for intimate

communion---to know the love of the Father and to participate in the life and ministry of Christ. Worship in the Bible is always presented to us as flowing from an awareness of who God is and what he has done...

The point is that we don't worship and otherwise obey God in order to get (earn) something or to otherwise get God to do something; we worship God in order to share in God's living and loving. In the gospel, the *imperatives* (do this, don't do that) always precede the *indicatives* (who we are, because of who God is and what he, in Christ, has done for us before we even thought of responding). JB comments:

Worship in the Bible is an ordinance of grace, a covenantal form of response to the God of grace, prescribed by God himself. This is supremely true of the New Testament understanding of worship, as the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world, in a life of wonderful communion.

Answering first the question, "Who is God? Who is Jesus Christ?" is thus of supreme importance. Why? Because our doctrine of God (*the who*) determines our understanding of our response (as in worship--the *what* and *how*). If we see God as somehow aloof and apart from us, our worship becomes individualistic and typically moralistic (it's all about *me*---what I must do and how I must do it to get God to bless me). But if God is seen for who he truly is---a tri-personal communion of holy love, incarnate for us and with us in the Person of Jesus, and by the Spirit ---then our worship (response to God and his grace) will be one of love, one of participating in the triune communion of God into which we are drawn by grace. JB comments:

It is in this Trinitarian way we have to see worship as the fulfilment of God's purposes in creation and redemption, to bring us into a life of communion with himself and one another. The triune God is in the business of creating community, in such a way that we are never more truly human, never more truly persons, that when we find our true being-in-communion.

This relational, Trinitarian understanding of worship helps us see and appreciate the primary and essential role that the God-man Jesus, our Mediator, plays in worship as our High Priest. As JB notes, in worship we are participating in our Lord's own worship on our behalf (through his vicarious humanity). JB gives the example of the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, noting how they are principal ways we participate in what Christ has done, once and for all, and in what he continues to do. JB elaborates:

Christ baptizes us by the Spirit that we might participate in his cleansing of our humanity and enter into his body, the communion of saints. At the Lord's Supper, he brings his passion to remembrance and draws us into wonderful communion---holy communion---with the

¹ Ephesians 4:5

² Romans 6

Sayings by Richard Rohr

As you look back on a year almost ended, recall the ways in which God has been inviting you to return, again and again, to Love which is the same as returning to God

If God is Trinity and Jesus is the face of God, then it is a benevolent universe. God is not someone to be afraid of, but is the Ground of Being and on our side.

The cross solved our problem by first revealing our real problem, our universal pattern of scapegoating and sacrificing others. The cross exposes forever the scene of our crime.

Creation is a process that is still happening and we're in on it! We are a part of this endless creativity of God.

The morning glories and the sunflowers turn naturally toward the light, but we have to be taught, it seems.

If unconditional love, loyalty, and obedience are the tickets to an eternal life, then my black Labrador, Venus, will surely be there long before me, along with all the dear animals in nature who care for their young at great cost to themselves and have suffered so much at the hands of humans.

There is a part of you that is Love itself, and that is what we must fall into. It is already there. Once you move your identity to that level of deep inner contentment, you will

realize you are drawing upon a Life that is much larger than your own and from a deeper abundance.

There is nothing to prove and nothing to protect. I am who I am and it's enough.

Once you experience being loved when you are unworthy, being forgiven when you did something wrong, that moves you into non-dual thinking. You move from what I call meritocracy, quid pro quo thinking, to the huge ocean of grace, where you stop counting or calculating.

God is always bigger than the boxes we build for God, so we should not waste too much time protecting the boxes.

Life is not a matter of creating a special name for ourselves, but of uncovering the name we have always had.

Maturity is the ability to joyfully live in an imperfect world.

The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.

The cross is the standing statement of what we do to one another and to ourselves. The resurrection is the standing statement of what God does to us in return.

When you get your, 'Who am I? question right, all of your, 'What should I do?' questions tend to take care of themselves

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Father, with himself and with one another [anticipating] our life in the kingdom of God, nourishing our faith "till he comes."

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not first about what we do, but about what God, in Christ, has done already and continues to do on our behalf. Thus we see baptism, for example, not as something that makes us a child of God, but what God in Christ has done to unite us to God as his children. Baptism affirms this truth, which is true in what JB calls "three moments":

1. In the heart of the Father, we all have been children of God from eternity.
2. We all became children of God when Christ the Son lived, died and rose again for all humanity long ago.
3. As individuals, we become children of God when the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of adoption) "seals in our faith and experience what had been planned from all eternity in the heart of the Father and what was completed once and for all [2,000 years ago] in Jesus Christ"

The sacraments celebrate these three moments of *the one act* of salvation. In the gospel, it is the second moment that is the decisive one and baptism (along with the Lord's Supper) is a sign of this one act of the triune God on our behalf---giving us ways to participate in, to experience, and thus be refreshed and renewed by the reality of God's work on our behalf. JB comments:

God forgives, God cleanses, God regenerates, God

adopts, God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts whereby we cry: "*Abba, Father.*" Our response to him is to say amen in faith---our passive recipient response. There is nothing more passive than dying, being buried, being baptized.

In both baptism and the Lord's Supper, we celebrate God's covenant of grace---a covenant that is unilateral, not bilateral. That covenant is not an agreement we make with God as though God's grace is contingent on our faith; our decisions. We are not, for example, baptized in order to cause God to act, but because God has acted *already*, in Christ, on our behalf. JB comments:

The good news is that God has made a covenant for us in Christ and sealed it with his blood, nineteen hundred years ago [now 2,000]. It is a unilateral covenant of grace... but we are summoned through the Spirit to say amen to it in faith and to participate in "Christ and his benefits."

When we are baptized, we are saying "amen" to the *one baptism* of Christ,¹ performed 2,000 years ago on behalf of all humanity. When we are personally baptized, we are incorporated into the *one body of Christ*, "that we might participate in all that [Christ] has done and is doing for us, that we might receive him with all his blessings." By the Spirit, Christ baptizes us "into a life of sonship, of service, of dying and rising with him in newness of life."² In these ways we understand baptism as a participatory seal, one that "marks out the individual personally as one who belongs to Christ, to make a visible difference between the church and the world." □

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Printed in Malaysia by Hin Press & Trading Sdn. Bhd. (71078-D), No. PT 45855, Batu 2, Jalan Kapar, 41400 Klang, Selangor, Malaysia.