



Meditations *on* Hope *and* Peace

Conversations along the way

Don Priest

Meditations on Hope and Peace

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Meditations on Hope and Peace

Introduction

Meditations on Hope and Peace explores ways communities can peacefully and purposefully flourish by living faithfully in God's grace and mercy. This book focuses on testimonies in the Hebrew Bible to God's creative and redemptive actions, and to the biblical witnesses of early Christian communities as they reflected on the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and reign of Jesus as their Messiah and Lord. When preparing these resources, I looked for ways in which biblical passages add narrative and thematic understandings and insights to a main reading. This intra-biblical approach provided me with opportunities to explore and appreciate relevant historical, literary and theological contexts.

This book is an edited collection of background notes written during sermon preparation. They are not academic papers and include little homiletic material. They are grouped by theme texts rather than in the order they were given or by the different locations in which they were presented. This arrangement of notes is not therefore the result of a prior order or strategic survey but comes from a living journey engaging in allocated opportunities. Where theme passages were prepared more than once, I have either included each set of notes with the hope that a mixture of repetition and variation may be helpful or merged them into one meditation. I have aimed to share my thought patterns without significantly altering my original designs. As all but three of these notes were based on lectionary readings, other passages than the chosen main text are sometimes highlighted.

My interests focused on the way the Bible's authors engaged in proto-Trinitarian thinking, on appreciating the centrality of incarnational and Christological considerations in the New Testament and on developing understandings of atonement and restoration, and humanity and creation. I prepared these resources when reflecting on the economic, social and spiritual experiences of those with whom we experienced community while I worked as an educator and leader mainly in government country area schools.

Meditations on Hope and Peace is in eight sections. Three of these cover the Old Testament, with the other five from the New Testament. The latter sections are Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, New Testament letters apart from those attributed to Paul or John, Luke's Gospel, the book of Acts and Paul's letters, and John's Gospel, John's letters and the book of Revelation. These groupings reflect natural connections between authors, content and context, and with their sub-groupings, give helpful insights to the concerns of the Bible's authors and the communities in which they lived and with which they shared.

Meditations on Hope and Peace is a lay-person's journal, written and shared in the hope that it will encourage growth in community and understanding as we care for one other in this beautiful but troubled world. It is published as a thanksgiving

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for the communities in which we lived and for the opportunities I was given to share in their gatherings for worship. I hope that reading this book helps motivate further exploration of biblical themes and passages in their historical and theological settings, and that, in so doing, readers find peace, joy and hope. I hope that reading it deepens worship, encourages relationships and enriches application to everyday life.

Meditations on Hope and Peace and *Living in Love and Freedom* bookend about forty years of lay ministry in church and inter-denominational groups, with *Meditations on Resilience and Renewal 1 and 2* sharing additional meditations.¹ They are a response to the biblical narratives of God's ongoing presence with his people, and recognition that these experiences have been passed on to us by those who devoted themselves to sharing these stories and insights with future generations. This is a reminder to us that each gathering of God's people is a unique event to be cherished, as are our recollections of our own times of refreshment and renewal, and an encouragement of us to hold

to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard ... in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus [and to guard] the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us (2 Timothy 1:13, 14; cf. 3:14–17; Hebrews 11:4, 12:1; 1 Peter 1:10–12; cf. 2 Peter 1:19).

Don Priest
January 2022

¹ Don Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2017). *Meditations on Resilience and Renewal*, vol. 1, (2022); *ibid.*, 2.

Law (*Torah*)

Father provider

Genesis 22:1–18, Luke 9:28–36 and Romans 8:31b–34

One God: three revelations

These three readings are breathtaking. The story of Abraham and God's provision of the lamb provides a context for the account of the transfiguration where Jesus met with Moses and Elijah who 'appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31). The reading from Romans chapter 8 can be considered as a review of these two stories:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:31, 32).

Paul wanted his readers to know what God does for his people. Paul's words are simple, but their meaning is enormous. His message was that God counted his love for his family ahead of his love for his own Son. The Father and the Son are eternal, their love is depthless and pure and seen in Jesus, by the Spirit. It is this love that is supremely evident in God not withholding his Son.

God's love for his creation and family

Abraham believed he was to sacrifice his only son as an act of worship. When Isaac asked Abraham about his father's intended sacrifice, Isaac was told that 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering' (Genesis 22:8). Isaac was God's son before he was Abraham's son. For Abraham, fearing God meant the death of his son by his own hands.

The lamb in the thicket was the LORD's gift to Abraham, pointing him and his descendants to the removal of sin by the Lamb of God (cf. John 1:29). For Paul, all of God's provisions for his people are best seen in this context (cf. Romans 4:1ff, 8:32). Abraham's fatherhood is still evident 5,000 years later. It was Abraham's realignment from a fatherhood that was ready to kill his own son to a fatherhood that cares for his son by the grace and mercy of God that was the fruit of this day at a mountain in the land of Moriah.

Paul identified the fruit of the cross in Romans 8:11, 15–19, 28–29. This harvest comes because of the life-giving, resurrecting power of God, to whom we cry 'Abba! Father!' by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:15, 16). Paul believed that the intercession of Jesus was and is aligned with God's will. The action at the cross *against* Jesus comes from the same enemies we experience, and from which God delivers us. It does not come from God being the kind of father that Abraham was shown that he was *not* to be (Romans 8:35–39)! At the cross, God the Father was *defeating*, not *repeating*, the kind of fatherhood from which Abraham was delivered! Abraham, then, is a figure of God as Father, and so is an example for us as parents and of us as God's children.

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Well might Abraham have said ‘Here I am’ to the angel of the LORD who ‘called to him from heaven’ (Genesis 22:11)! The angel was about to reveal an eternal purpose of God in all history. Well might Abraham have ‘looked up’ when the angel told him not to lay a hand on his dear and only son for whom he had waited so long! The angel was prophesying of the true Father who would, in and with his Son, destroy evil’s grip on guilty humanity. The action of God not withholding his own Son was not an action *against* his Son, but an action *in, with and through* his Son (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19). Paul would have us see not a divided God, but a God in tri-unity sparing nothing to defeat the enemies we face (Romans 8:35–39). Well might Abraham sacrifice the lamb that the LORD provided! In so doing, Abraham was proclaiming that in Jesus’ death, God was overcoming evil’s attack on humanity and its grip on death in his love for his Son, and releasing his creation, and so his whole family, into ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21)!

Transfiguring the disfigured

At Jesus’ transfiguration, the Father declared his love for his Son (Luke 9:35). This love was not about to fade and fail when Jesus was crucified but was to serve and achieve God’s purposes for us and creation (Luke 9:18–22). There are at least three clear indications that the subject of Jesus’ discussion with Moses and Elijah was the cross. Jesus’ disciples kept this conversation secret until after his death (Luke 9:36, cf. 9:21). John the Baptist had been murdered, and Jesus was linked with him (cf. Luke 9:7ff, 19). Also, Moses and Elijah were speaking about his *exodus* that he was about to fulfil (Luke 9:31)!

This third point is pivotal. It tells us that Jesus had set out on a ‘departure’. He had come from the Father, who was pleased with all he was doing. Jesus was not alone in accomplishing what he had been given to do. Paul, in Romans 8, indicated that God, our Father, will, through the cross gather an enormous family to himself – a family for whom he has given everything in the cross, and for whom he has richly provided. He, the Father, has given his family ‘everything else’ (Romans 8:28, 32). Jesus Christ is the resurrected Lamb who, with the Spirit, intercedes for us in this divine, triune action (Romans 8:26, 27, 34). The triune God intervenes on our behalf against all that is opposed to him, and gives us victory, even though we be daily led as ‘sheep to be slaughtered’ (Romans 8:36).

We are to see the Father’s love and see the Son’s loving self-giving. We are to see all our sins destroyed in the Lamb ‘slain from before the foundation of the world’ (Revelation 13:8). We are to see the eternal provision of the Father for his family. It has been aptly said that Jesus was transfigured in order that he might be disfigured, so that we who are disfigured might be transfigured. This is the mystery and majesty of God’s love in Christ, of Christ’s love in the Spirit and the love of the Spirit of the living God.

True worship

Genesis 28:10–22; John 4:4–42

God was already there

Jacob, on the run after cheating to get his father's inheritance, slept. God faced him with the fact that having God's inheritance through his father, Abraham, meant returning home to his family and living in God's presence (Genesis 28:15).

Jacob, like the prophet Jonah much later, realised that God was already in the place to which he, as a rebel, had run: 'Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!"' (Genesis 28:16). Jacob, amazed and afraid, called the place Bethel, meaning house of God, and promised, with God's help, to return home to his family. Jacob discovered something of true worship: God had revealed true worship to Jacob!

In spirit and in truth

The New Testament story of the woman at the well has some similarities with the account of Jacob at Bethel. She arrived physically thirsty for water which could not permanently quench her thirst. Jesus spoke to her of her spiritual thirst for spiritual water that springs up to 'eternal life' (John 4:14). She wanted the latter, but, as Jesus pointed out, his gift involved her turning from her previous way of worship. Her question concerning where worship occurs, in Jerusalem or Samaria, paralleled Jacob's realisation in the previous dialogue. Jesus pointed her not to where, but to who and to how. True worship, he said was authentic, it was to God the Father and 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:23).

How easily we can be side-tracked, like Jacob and the woman at the well, into other assessments of the truth of worship. Our social identity, the traditional or contemporary rituals we prefer and the structures we rely on, can become diversions rather than be contexts for true worship. Although these and similar realities may involve valid concerns, they can become false gods if we are running from God. They then lead to death and not life.

God's dwelling place is awesome!

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church asking them whether they realised that they were 'God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in [them]' (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19). As God's dwelling place, they, like Jacob and the Samaritan woman, were learning that true worship is to God the Father. He strengthens our 'inner being with power through his Spirit, ... that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith' (Ephesians 3:14–21; cf. John 16:25–28).

True worship is in the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us, according to God's will (Romans 8:26ff; 1 Corinthians 2:10ff; Ephesians 5:15ff). God reveals himself by his Spirit who searches all things, even the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10).

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God gives his Spirit so that we may know ‘that we abide in him and he in us’ (1 John 4:13).

True worship is in the truth, in Jesus (cf. Ephesians 4:21). He is the Word of God, the way to, and the truth and life of the Father (John 1:1, 8:32, 14:6; cf. Colossians 3:15–17; 1 John 5:6).

True worship involves our total being as worshippers, as it did for Jacob and the woman at the well. References to ‘the house of the God of Jacob’ in the Hebrew Bible suggest that memories of the God-who-was-already-there, and whose presence at Bethel was ‘awesome’, were much deeper than merely nationalistic or notional (cf. Romans 12:1, 2; Psalm 84; Isaiah 2:1–5).

Living water

Exodus 17:1–7 and John 4:5–42

Days of dryness

Water is very significant in these two readings. The LORD assured Moses he would ‘be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb’ enabling water to come out of the rock that Moses was to strike (Exodus 17:6, 7). Jesus ignored cultural barriers when he asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. He saw her need, raised the issue of true thirst and living water and assured her of God’s gift of living water (John 4:10).

A psalmist sang a song affirming the LORD’s faithful, restorative love for all creation and all humanity consistent with the LORD’s command to Moses and Jesus’ offer to the Samaritan woman. Everyone, the poet declared, can find shelter, feast on God’s abundant provisions and ‘drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light’ (Psalm 36:5–9).

With a less positive tone, a Hebrew proverb noted that ‘Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked’ (Proverbs 25:26). Jesus spoke of living water on a later occasion after leaving Samaria (John 7:37–39; cf. Job 34:14, 15). It seems that Jesus wanted to reverse God’s lament to Jeremiah that God’s people had forsaken him and swapped ‘their glory for something that does not profit’. God’s people had ‘dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water’ rather than rely on God as ‘the fountain of living water’ (Jeremiah 2:13).

In what ways could Jesus satisfy this Samaritan woman’s thirst? What does it mean for the children of Israel under Moses, or the woman at the Samaritan well, or anyone, to drink God’s living water?

Days of the Spirit

There are two stories concerning Moses bringing water from a rock, both summarised by Ezra after the people’s return from exile:

You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst (Nehemiah 9:20; cf. Psalm 95).

At Rephidim, shortly after leaving Egypt, and prior to conflict with the Amalekites, God told Moses to strike a rock in response to their complaint about access to water (Exodus 17:1–7). Later, at Kadesh (Numbers 20:1–13), just after Miriam’s death (cf. Exodus 15:20; Numbers 12:1ff), and just before conflict with Edom (Numbers 20:14ff), Moses was told to speak to the rock, but spoke ‘words that were rash’ and struck the rock twice (Psalm 106:32; cf. Proverbs 12:18). Because of his angry response, Moses was forbidden entry into the promised land.

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The woman Jesus met at the Samaritan well had a difficult history and wanted living water, not simply water from the village well. Following Jesus' ministry to her, and her testimony to him, many local people believed (John 4:27–42).

As Jesus predicted, the 'days of the Spirit' are from Pentecost to the *Parousia* (John 7:37–39). There is abundant water of life for days of dryness. We need never remain thirsty again amid the struggles and strains of daily life.

Jesus is the struck rock, smitten by angry, religious authorities. He went into the dusty deserts of human rebellion, arriving at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, richly supplied with the resources of eternal glory, to thirst our thirst so that we may experience 'a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14; cf. Psalm 22:14–31). The last verses of Psalm 16 describe God's amazing grace and mercy to his people (cf. Revelation 7:9–17, 22:14–17):

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Prophets (*Nevi'im*)

The LORD has helped us

1 Samuel 7:3–17

Who can stand before the LORD, this holy God?

What has God done for us and through us? What is God wanting to do with us and through us? These are questions that, while we may never adequately or accurately answer them, are good to ask in times of transition, in quiet times, at high or low points in our lives, or when reflecting on our conversion.

Israel was wondering about answers to questions like these. The Philistines had killed four thousand Israelites in battle. The ark of the covenant, brought to the battle as a good luck charm in the hope that God would help them, had been captured and a further 30,000 Israelite soldiers had been killed (1 Samuel 4:1–11). The Ark dated back to the Exodus and was linked with God's covenant with Israel. It symbolised their national identity and their history of being blessed by God.

The Ark's capture did the Philistines no good. At Ashdod, the idol of Dagon fell over and broke and plagues broke out at Ashdod, Gath and Ekron. After these events, the Philistines decided to return the Ark with a guilt offering pulled by cows without any help or direction. They thought the route taken by the cows would indicate whether their sufferings were God's judgements, or whether the plagues were random events (1 Samuel 5:1–6:9). The death of seventy men who did not rejoice at its arrival back in Israel was understood to be a warning not to tamper with the things of God (1 Samuel 6:10–21)!

The Ark was taken to Jerusalem from Abinadab's house twenty years later. His grandson, Uzzah, died while steadyng it. David was angry because of this tragedy and left the Ark at the house of Obed-Edom, rather than have it complete its journey. David decided to bring the Ark to Jerusalem after God blessed Obed-Edom (2 Samuel 6:1–13).

Direct your heart to the LORD

Samuel addressed the people when the Ark was returned by the Philistines. He told them to put away their idols and to end the prostitution associated with the idols. The people were told that if they served God alone, he would deliver them from their enemies. Samuel then gathered all of Israel to Mizpah, where he prayed for them. Water was poured out before the LORD as a sign of the presence or spirit of God and the people confessed their sins.

As the Philistines gathered for further battle Samuel offered a 'sucking lamb' as a 'whole burnt offering to the LORD' and prayed for Israel (1 Samuel 7:9). 'The LORD thundered with a mighty voice' and Israel defeated the Philistines: they 'did not again enter the territory of Israel ... all the days of Samuel' (1 Samuel 7:10–13).

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This victory was thought of as a high point in their history, along with their Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the entry into the promised land, the victory at Jericho, David's reign, Solomon's temple, and their return from Babylon. Samuel, as prophet and judge, 'administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to the LORD', sealing this event with a stone of help called Ebenezer, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us' (1 Samuel 7:13–17, cf. 4:1, 5:1). The Israelite memorials were testimonies to God's saving love and mercy, rather than to their own achievements or failures.

A living stone and a spiritual house

Jesus is the 'living stone ... chosen and precious in God's sight'. We are being built into a spiritual house, with Jesus as the cornerstone. The apostle's confidence was that 'To [those] then who believe, he is precious' (1 Peter 2:4–10). The believers to whom Peter wrote were to rid themselves of idolatry and immorality, just as Samuel exhorted (1 Peter 2:11, 12). We, like those who read Peter's letters, live in the tension of our failures and God's generosity in Jesus Christ our Lord (cf. Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:23–25).

Paul wrote that we were dead in sins, following the ways of this world and its ruler, satisfying our own desires, and experiencing God's refusal to endorse evil. God, however, is rich in mercy, saving us by grace through faith; not of our works, but by his, in Christ (Ephesians 2:1–10)! As Samuel urged, let us recall how God has helped us. Let us come to Jesus as the Ebenezer of help and acknowledge God's grace and our vulnerabilities and failures:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.²

In the spirit of Titus 2:11–14, we do well to do a spiritual stocktake, knowing we can have complete confidence in God (Jude 20–25):

Come thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

Here I'll raise my Ebenezer;
Hither by Thy help I've come;
And I hope by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.³

² John Newton, 'Amazing Grace,' <https://hymnary.org/hymn/AM2013/587>.

³ Robert Robinson; Martin Madan, 'Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,' <https://hymnary.org/hymn/RPH1934/94>.

The life of a prophet

1 Kings 19:4–8

The voice of the prophet

There are few people mentioned in the Old Testament whose profile in the New Testament is greater than that of Elijah. The story of his life begins with him boldly declaring to King Ahab that ‘As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word’ (1 Kings 17:1).

Once the Wadi Cherith dried up, where Elijah hid and was fed by ravens, he went to Zarephath, to a boy and his mother who had virtually no provisions (1 Kings 17:12). After ensuring that she had divinely provided provisions, her son died, and Elijah prayed for him to return to life. Her obedience in feeding Elijah, and her joy at seeing her son alive again, led to her affirmation that he was a ‘man of God’ who told the truth (1 Kings 17:17–24).

In the third year of drought, Elijah met Obadiah, who oversaw Ahab’s palace and ‘revered the LORD greatly’. Elijah sent him to Ahab even though Obadiah feared God’s spirit might take Elijah away. When Ahab did meet Elijah, Ahab accused Elijah of troubling Israel (1 Kings 18:1–20)!

The story of Elijah at Mount Carmel follows with Elijah challenging the people: ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him’ (1 Kings 18:21). Elijah invited them to set up an altar to Baal during the daytime and teased them (1 Kings 18:27).

Elijah built an altar in the evening using twelve stones and poured water on it three times before praying. When ‘the fire of the LORD fell and consumed’ everything, the people ‘fell on their faces and said, “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God”’ (1 Kings 18:38–39).

The narrator wrote of Elijah killing the false prophets, but, unlike earlier descriptions, made no mention of the word of the LORD coming to Elijah about his violent action (cf. 1 Kings 17:2, 5, 8, 16, 18:1, 19:9, 21:17, 28).

After Elijah warned of coming rain, Elijah hid his face and his servant saw ‘a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea’ on the seventh time that he looked. Elijah told him to tell Ahab that the rain would stop him unless Ahab left at once.

In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. But the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel (1 Kings 18:44–46).

The sound of sheer silence

After Elijah's defeat of the prophets of Baal, Jezebel promised to kill him. Elijah was frightened, fled to the desert and wanted to die (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah was fed twice by an angel before travelling for 'forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God' (1 Kings 19:8).

God asked Elijah why he was at Horeb. Elijah responded, explaining that his life was threatened. God told him to 'stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by' (1 Kings 19:11). Then came the strong wind, the earthquake, the fire and the 'sound of sheer silence' before Elijah was given further instructions (1 King 19:11–18).

By God's mercies

Among the many lessons we can learn from this story, the nominated verses focus on the angel's provision of nourishment for Elijah. Just as the ravens at the Wadi Cherith fed him, and just as the widow at Zarephath cared for him, so after the drama at Mount Carmel, God again provided the food and water his prophet needed (cf. Psalm 23:5; 1 Corinthians 11:23–27). The spiritual nourishment that comes with earthly provisions always comes from heaven (Psalm 34; John 6:48–63, 7:37–39).

The people's idolatry, and Elijah's invitation not to limp between two alternatives, is a reminder that serving two masters is not sustainable (cf. Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; Galatians 6:7–10). The prophetic word calls for faithful obedience to God and restraint, especially when his judgements are evident (cf. 1 Kings 18:40, 19:10). Prophets and people both need God's mercies to recalibrate! Elijah was on this journey when he reached the conclusion that his life was no longer viable: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors' (1 Kings 19:4). His life had always depended on the sustaining and renewing power of God, and nothing about that had changed. His calling did not make him superior to those who preceded him, or those who would follow him (cf. 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 about true messages and frail messengers).

Redemptive holiness

Isaiah 6:1–13

God's holiness changes us

Isaiah's account begins with a very personal tone: he saw the Lord enthroned,⁴ ruling as Israel's covenant God, the 'LORD of hosts', and the whole earth was filled with his glory. The voices, the shaking of the building, and the smoke all reinforce the intensity of what the prophet experienced in his vision and the depths of the holiness revealed to him. The reference in John 12:37–43 to this passage is placed after Jesus spoke about light:

Jesus said to them, 'The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you'.

It also precedes Jesus' conversation with his disciples in the upper room, which John introduced by affirming Jesus' love 'to the end' for 'his own who were in the world', before going on to describe Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1–9). The links between light, love and glory that are evident in John chapters 12 and 13 indicate that knowing God meant knowing God's love and holiness. We can't know God any deeper than we know his love, and we won't know his love any deeper than we know his holiness. Likewise, we won't know his holiness any deeper than we know his love. God comes in his holiness to us to cleanse us and to restore us. He reveals himself as holy not to accuse and punish us but to purify and sanctify us.

God's holiness sends us

Isaiah 6:1ff, Luke 5:1–11 and 1 Corinthians 15:1ff help explain the revelation of holiness, as does Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1ff). God's holiness not only comes to cleanse and restore us, but to send us out to proclaim and to testify to his redeeming and reconciling grace and mercy. Our calling and motivation are of, and come from, a revelation of God as holy. We do not achieve holiness by trying to become holy from our so-called own resources, but by being drawn by grace and mercy to know God as holy.

As 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 John 1:9 explain, cleansing is at the forefront of God's purpose and plan for renewal and restoration. God's initiative in loving us is to remove fear and prepare us for life in this world and the one to come (1 John 4:17–19).

⁴ 'Lord' in verse 1 is the word for sovereignty and awe spoken in place of Yahweh as 'LORD'.

What happened on the cross?

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Two alternatives

We can gauge something of Jesus' suffering by listening to his seven sayings from the cross. Reading Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 53 helps us comprehend more, while the New Testament epistles include many further insights. As the account of Philip and the Ethiopian visitor to Jerusalem suggests, considering this information and wisdom involves a personal crisis (Acts 8:26–40). One aspect of this crisis links with Isaiah 53:4, where the prophet wrote that God's servant 'has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted'.

Isaiah presents two alternatives: God's servant either suffered because of his own failures, or because of the failures of God's people. We may not express Isaiah's views in the same way he did, but the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death raises similar questions for us.

Some understanding of Jesus' sufferings comes from reading the Gospel accounts of his crucifixion. John's and Luke's narratives each record three sayings, while Matthew and Mark record the same question. Luke's careful historical and medical detail and John's intimate and sensitive description provide expanded contexts for the decisive overview of Mark and the royal perspective of Matthew. The references to Nicodemus, Joseph, the women (including Jesus' mother) and Jesus' disciples give further perspectives to the seven final statements Jesus made about his suffering. His incredible cry 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' is best considered in the light of the four Gospel narratives (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Isaiah's two options regarding the suffering of God's servant are seen in those present at Jesus' death. The crowd, the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers and both thieves thought Jesus was being punished for his own failures, while one thief and a Roman centurion reached a similar conclusion to that in Isaiah 53:4–6. There is a vast difference between identifying with and bearing the illnesses, diseases, failures and sufferings of other people and enduring those directly relating to one's own self. The LORD's actions need not be seen as being against this individual or community sufferer but as journeying with afflicted people in the sense of the 23rd psalm.

Holy, redeeming love

Behind the question as to whether Jesus suffered for his own failures, or for other people's faults, is a question regarding God's response to human failure. A psalmist declared that 'God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day',

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or ‘who expresses his wrath every day’. (Psalm 7:11 NRSV and NIV; cf. Nicodemus and the serpent, and John 3:34–36).

There is anger where love is rejected. Evil anger is inherent in perverse love, while holy wrath is seen when God’s holy, redeeming love is spurned. The wrath of God is not the outpouring of some inner, intemperate rage within God’s own personal being. It is God’s intentional insistence on being merciful and gracious in the face of mercilessness and gracelessness.

In his sufferings and death, Christ suffered the vile human abuse of defiance and depravity. His suffering revealed God’s holy judgement against evil. Christ hung and died as God with humanity, and as humanity before God. He suffered and revealed that God’s righteous indignation against sin is grace and mercy, and that humanity’s unrighteous revolt against divine holiness brings death and desolation.

God does not ignore human evil, nor does he pretend there is no such thing as human rebellion. Jesus came and died by divine design and in the face of human defiance. Humanity abandoned him in the hope that he would be destroyed, and that selfish love would prevail. He was forsaken – left to die – by God in the certainty that he would, as *God-with-us*, destroy all human evil in the cleansing holiness of God’s triune love, mercy and grace. He remained one with humanity to be that sacrifice which brings us home to God from the impurity of our filthy evil. He remained one with his Father and the Holy Spirit in achieving God’s plan to purify and sanctify his creation.

Here, at the cross, is therefore the greatest crisis of human history. Here is that moral, ethical event which is crucial to all other events in human history. Here is that event which impacts the outcome of every other human activity. Here is that event which guarantees the new creation is realised by God’s grace and not from selfish human ambition. Here is that event which confirms all self-serving human politics to be futile.

Let us never pretend otherwise. Let us never conclude that the cross was nothing more than a divine drama, played out only to show the heart of God, without accomplishing anything, or needing to achieve anything. Let us never dream that forgiveness can be secured simply by the church or its sacraments. Let us never offer any other comfort for human depravity and deprivation than that which is in the cross of Christ.

Either we were judged in him, or we come to judgement alone. Either we were cleansed in him, or our consciences are forever blood-stained. Either we are redeemed from God’s wrath in him, or we bear God’s wrath forever. Either he destroyed the power of sin, or we remain sin’s slaves for all eternity.

The first letter of John asserts that we only know God’s love to the extent we realise that Jesus’ death is an atoning sacrifice; and that we are free from fear knowing that his love has destroyed every judgement (1 John 1:5–2:2 and 4:7–19).

Come to the waters

Isaiah 55:1–3

Abundant provision

Isaiah's message of God's warm and wonderful invitation is to all who are thirsty and who lack the necessary resources to purchase life-sustaining provisions. God's invitation is threefold. People are invited to 'come to the waters', to 'buy and eat' without paying anything and to purchase 'wine and milk' without spending anything (Isaiah 55:1, 2). The provisions on offer are 'good' and 'rich', and so are satisfying and nutritious (cf. Genesis 1). They bring the life and joy of God's 'everlasting covenant' of love (Isaiah 55:3).

To respond to God's invitation is to come to him and be embraced by his faithful love. This exhortation to come is expanded throughout the New Testament, including in passages relating to living water and the bread of life.

Promises of living water; of an abundant receiving of the Holy Spirit

Jesus promised the Samaritan woman living water and later repeated his invitation in Jerusalem (John 4:13, 14, 7:37–38). The book of Revelation concludes the New Testament with the same message (Revelation 22:17–21).

Promises of the bread of life; of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord

Jesus revealed something of himself as the bread of life when he fed five thousand men, plus women and children (Matthew 14:13–21). Jesus' response to the religious leaders made this tacit revelation explicit (John 6:35, 53–58).

Paul's explanation of the Lord's Supper builds on and reinforces these revelations (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

Promises of wine, milk and rich food; of the shed blood of Jesus and milk for God's initial nourishing of his word of life in us

Paul said he gave milk to immature believers and solid food to those who were mature (1 Corinthians 3:2). The writer of Hebrews urged his readers to come to maturity, having 'tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:1–3). These invitations tell us of God's generosity and indicate his loving provision for his people. A psalmist declared the LORD's faithfulness, grace, justice and kindness in providing 'food in due season', in being 'near to all who call on him ... in truth'. The LORD is said to satisfy the longings of those in awe of him and to watch over everyone who loves him (Psalm 145:13–19).

Jesus instructed his disciples along the same line of thought:

When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. ... If you then, who are evil, know how

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to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:1–13 NIV)!

Paul wrote that God 'did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us', and indicated that God would 'with him also give us everything else' (Romans 8:32). These passages can be understood as including God's gifts of living water and living bread!

Abundant pardon

Why is there a need to be invited to such a feast, to such a banquet of love, to this rich and abundant celebration of life? Why does Isaiah speak of thirst, hunger, poverty and futile effort when these resources are on offer? Jeremiah described the LORD calling on the heavens to be appalled, shocked and totally desolate because God's people had been doubly evil:

they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cracked cisterns [for themselves] that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:12, 13).

Isaiah's urgent plea was for God's people to

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:6, 7).

These are wonderful words for bitter, angry, hurt, broken-hearted, bowed down, frustrated, resentful people – for those who, for whatever reason, valid or otherwise, are spiritually thirsty, hungry and poor. They assure us that there is living bread and living water, and new wine and fresh milk. They affirm that the richest of food is available for everyone. In the words of the psalmist, they teach God's people about the LORD's grace, mercy, steadfast love, goodness 'and his compassion ... over all that he has made' (Psalm 145:8, 9).

These qualities are evident in the work of God's servant (Isaiah 53:4–9). Who could refuse the invitation in Isaiah 55:1–3 that (from a New Testament perspective) comes from God as creator-king, the glorious Father, from the Lord Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son, and in and through the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 55:1–3)? The pathway for us to travel on includes provisions for all seasons of life:

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.

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Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong deliverer,
Be Thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of deaths, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, I will ever give to Thee.

Land me safe on Canaan's side
Bid my anxious fears, *bid my anxious fears, goodbye!*⁵

⁵ William Williams, and Casella, Jeremy (alt.) ‘Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,’ <http://hymnbook.igracemusic.com/hymns/guide-me-o-thou-great-jehovah> (italics added).

Jonah and the judgement

Jonah 3:1–10

Where is the judgement?

Jonah believed that the sinfulness of the people of Nineveh called for God's judgement, and that this judgement would mean the destruction of their city. His reluctance to preach judgement to them was because he also 'knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing' (Jonah 4:2) He knew that God would not destroy Nineveh if they repented; and knew this as surely as he knew God's call to preach there. Why else would God warn them, if not to save them?

It is worth noting that Jonah deserved judgement just as much as the citizens at Nineveh. Yet he is also not destroyed. Jonah's task was to preach judgement, not to pass judgement. His dilemma was that if Nineveh deserved judgement, why would none occur? Paul's message to the church in Rome centuries later addresses some of Jonah's concerns (Romans 2:1–5).

Jonah's message of impending judgement was an expression of God's loving 'kindness and forbearance and patience'. The city's repentance must have included hope that God's compassion for them would help them change their self-destructive behaviours towards each other and their provisions.

The sign of Jonah

In Matthew 12:38–41, Jesus was asked for a miracle to authenticate himself. Jesus' answer was that an 'evil and adulterous generation' asks for signs, but that the only sign it will be given is the 'sign of the prophet Jonah' and that

The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

This passage includes a significant statement concerning God's judgement. His final judgement of us focuses on repentance and belief in the Son of Man rather than simply being about moral behaviour. Jesus' message was that Jonah's sign – three days and three nights in the sea monster's belly – was prophetic of his death and resurrection. Just as God revealed the depths of his love to Jonah in the ocean depths, so Christ would reveal the depths of God's love by his death. As the Apostle's Creed says: 'He descended into hell'.⁶ Jesus went there with his will at one with God's will, while Jonah's was fixed on his own agenda. Jesus was serene, while Jonah was angry; Jesus rejoiced at the joy before him; Jonah was distressed at what happened to him.

⁶ *An Australian Prayer Book*, (Sydney, NSW: Anglican Information Office, 1978), 26.

Angry to death?

Our choice is often whether to be angry like Jonah, or whether to let God dissolve our sinful wrath in his redeeming love. The judgements we seek are easily saturated with our wickedness. God does not agree with these verdicts. He provides the only true judgement on all human evil. His wrath is different from that of Jonah; his wrath is the action of his holy love to purify us and make us his family (1 John 2:1, 2, 3:1–3, 4:7–21). God transforms and restores in and through his beloved Son, a greater prophet than Jonah (1 John 1:5–7).

The miracle of the Ninevites' repentance occurred after Jonah had proclaimed a negative, judgemental 'gospel' to them! There is also no evidence that the people attempted to propitiate God by sacrifices or rituals: they simply repented. No wonder Jesus used them as a case study for repentance!⁷

⁷ Cf. Geoffrey Bingham, *Angel Wings*, 2nd ed. (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1992), 13–25. See 'Geoffrey Bingham,' <https://geoffreybingham.com>; 'New Creation Teaching Ministry Resource Library,' <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>.

He will be their peace

Micah 5:2–5

Desperate times

Micah was writing in desperate times. God's people were under siege. Micah indicated that this siege was not merely evil at war with God's people. According to the prophet, God was judging his people through these evil powers. Micah recorded God saying: 'I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks' (Micah 2:3). But this God is the same one who promised to send a shepherd to establish peace for his people (Micah 2:5).

It is only false prophets who say that God's Holy Spirit would not be opposed to iniquity, injustice and the abuse of power. True prophets, like Micah, face human rage 'filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might'. They oppose those who 'abhor justice and pervert all equity' while teaching for 'a price' and giving 'oracles for money'. True prophets contradict those who do these things and 'lean upon the LORD and say, "Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us"' (Micah 3:8–12). True prophets declare that God 'has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8).

Messages of mercy and peace

Micah declared salvation in judgement. He spoke of a ruler being born into the least significant Israelite tribe, a ruler with ancient origins. What a fitting Advent prophecy! Jesus was born in Bethlehem as Micah foretold. He was born in an animal shelter in a remote village of the Roman Empire. His parents were on a forced journey. They were not on their Christmas holidays!

God's promised one settles disputes and causes nations to turn their swords into ploughshares. It is this one who will be their peace (Micah 4:5). But how can this peace be the fruit of judgement? Paul wrote to the Roman church that God had come in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering, and had brought peace (Romans 5:1, 8:1–6, 14:17, 15:13, 16:20).

The crib tells of the cross. The prophecies of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon make that clear (Luke 1 and 2). The awful murders of children prophesied by Jeremiah accompanied him telling of the coming day when God would make a new covenant with his people (Matthew 2:16–18; Jeremiah 31:15). They would all know him because he would 'forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more' (Jeremiah 31:27–34).

Micah thought the same way. God's judgements, however distressing, are messages and actions of his mercy, while his mercy reveals God's verdicts. It is the LORD's saviour who

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will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace (Micah 5:4, 5 NIV).

How can this be unless this ruler is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep? Unless this shepherd pours out his Father's love and fulfils his Father's plan by laying down his life, and by taking it up again (John 10:1–18)?

Micah's final prophecy summarised and affirmed his hope in and awe of God pardoning evil and overlooking the people's wickedness. God, declared Micah, would be true to his commitments to the nation's ancestors:

He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18–20).

Micah's prophecies can be understood as fulfilled in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They include his anticipation of a time of peace and prosperity when nations will come to the LORD's house to learn of God's ways and to walk in God's paths:

For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever (Micah 4:1–5).

Writings (*Ketuvim*)

The promise of peace

Psalm 85:8–13

Hearing the LORD

Psalm 85:8 declares ‘Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts’ or ‘I will listen to what God the LORD will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints – but let them not return to folly’ (NIV).

Amaziah, King Jeroboam of Israel’s priest in Bethel, advised the king that Amos was guilty of treason (Amos 7:10–17). Amaziah told Amos to ‘go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom’ (Amos 7:12, 13). Amos’ reply picked up on Amaziah’s command to go. Amos’ response to the king’s priest was that the LORD had already taken him from his normal work, and had told him to ‘Go’, not away from the land of Judah, but to ‘prophesy to my people Israel’ (Amos 7:14, 15). Amaziah was told to ‘hear the word of the LORD’, rather than tell Amos where to go and what to say! Amos’ message to him was that coming events would reveal who was sovereign, king Jeroboam or God!

Jesus sent his disciples out two by two. If people were not willing to listen to them, then they were to witness against them by moving elsewhere (Mark 6:7–13). Jesus proclaimed: ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ (e.g. Mark 4:23, 24), and told parables precisely so that people would not hear unless they first were willing to forsake everything and to follow him.

Each of the seven letters to the churches in the book of Revelation has a similar message: ‘Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Revelation 2, 3). Paul wrote of God’s message being hidden and of Satan blinding people’s minds to the truth of God that is revealed in and by the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:1–6). The book of Romans describes ways in which we suppress the truth by our unrighteousness (Romans 1:18ff). Paul noted that if we would hear we could hear (Romans 10:12–21). John’s letters similarly speak of truly knowing what we do know, of not being deceived by false images, by false perceptions of the truth, or by idols. Jeremiah had earlier thought along the same lines (Jeremiah 6:9–19).

Hearts turned to the LORD

The psalmist indicated that we need better hearts if we are to have better hearing. He was clear about what would result from true listening and was confident about what God wanted to say to God’s people. He believed God would bring peaceful messages to those who were faithful – whose hearts were oriented towards God. The poet was certain that God’s salvation was nearby for anyone in awe of God, and that God’s deliverance would lead to glory dwelling in their land. He expected

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that ‘Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other’ not as opposites or enemies but as harmonious voices in a divine symphony where the LORD would provide abundant goodness and where righteousness would lead the way (Psalm 85:8–13).

Jesus is a peace-bringer from his birth, in his ministry, in the upper room with his disciples, and before and after his crucifixion. As Peter declared: ‘You know the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all’ (Acts 10:36). Consider the Gadarene demoniac as an example: his peace after being healed contrasted with the people’s earlier apparent peace (Matthew 8:28–9:1)!

The paradox of Amos’ prophecy, and the refusal of God’s people to listen, was that peace would come through judgement. We may fear God’s judgement. We may be angry with God and not want prophets like Amos to speak of judgement, of woe for those at ease in Zion, of great calamity and disaster coming on God’s people. Yet, the paradox of the gospel and the message of the cross, of Jesus our Saviour, is that we only know peace to the extent that we accept God’s love and grace judging every smallest trace of our sin, as well as everyone else’s sins. That we only know peace to the extent that we see God is creating peace with us and bringing peace to us through Jesus’ holy, perfect, sinless offering of himself. That only in the Father sending his Son in the Spirit’s power to die for us and among us is it possible for our warfare with God and other people to cease. That at the cross, by God’s strange great grace, peace came through judgement, and that God’s judgement was his peace! Oh, the magnitude of such holy generosity which in judging us brings restoration with God and each other (Ephesians 1:1–2:21).

I love the LORD

Psalm 116:1–9

Because he first loved me

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live (Psalm 116:1, 2).

What does it mean to love the LORD, and to have a deeply warm, totally embracing love for Jesus as Lord and for God as Father? An old gospel song says: ‘Oh how I love Jesus, because he first loved me’. We may add: ‘To me he is so wonderful, because he so loved me’⁸

Jesus was invited to the house of a Pharisee called Simon. As Jesus reclined on the couch by the eating table, a local woman whom Luke called ‘a sinner’ heard where Jesus was located and

brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment (Luke 7:37, 38).

Simon was outraged that Jesus accepted her attention and affection. She was a social reject and unacceptable to those with whom the Pharisee mixed. Her emotion and exuberance were, to them, quite out of place. Jesus sensed Simon’s anger and told him a story of two people who both owed different amounts of money to a creditor. One owed a small amount and the other a large amount. According to Jesus’ account, the creditor forgave them both. Jesus asked Simon ‘Which of them will love [the creditor] more’ (Luke 7:42)? Simon naturally replied that the one with the greater debt would love the creditor more. Then came the rub. Jesus pointed out to Simon how unwelcoming Simon had been, and, by contrast, how warm the woman was. Jesus’ conclusion was that the woman’s love for him was evidence of many forgiven sins, and that those who find little need for forgiveness will love little.

This is not the only Gospel account that shows this truth. Later in his ministry, just before his death, a similar event took place, this time at Mary and Martha’s house, immediately after Lazarus had been raised. Judas complained that the woman’s perfume was wasted, and shortly afterwards went and betrayed his master.

A while after this, Peter would not at first let Jesus wash his feet. It was only after betraying Christ that Peter discovered how much it meant to truly love his Lord.

⁸ Frederick Whitfield, ‘Oh, How I Love Jesus,’
http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Oh_How_I_Love_Jesus/.

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After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus helped Peter back into relationship when he asked Peter three times whether Peter loved him.

Do we identify with the outcast woman who so loved her Lord that she unashamedly wept in public as she expressed her love for him? Or with Simon the Pharisee, Judas or Peter? Whoever we identify with, there is one sure reality. In all these accounts Jesus loved those involved. He loved the woman who anointed him. He loved Simon, Judas and Peter. The point of issue was their response, whether they received or rejected him and his love, and not whether he loved them!

The LORD has dealt bountifully with me

David was in a crisis in which he needed to know the LORD's love. He testified that God 'heard my voice and my supplications ... he inclined his ear to me' (Psalm 116:1, 2). Such was the impact on David of God's response that David said he would 'call on him as long as I live' (Psalm 116:2). He declared that the LORD God is gracious, righteous and merciful, and so protects and rescues the vulnerable and downcast:

Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling (Psalm 116:5–8).

We might sometimes see God as capricious, nasty and severe. We might fear his loving judgements and expect his holy wrath. We may deserve these outcomes, but they are not what we need to suffer. Just as many others have discovered, we too can experience God's saving grace and mercy, and know his forgiveness and restoration. The writer of John's Gospel, presumably Jesus' disciple John, described God's love in terms of God giving his Son to rescue those who trust Jesus (and God) and to give them eternal life (John 3:16, 36).

The elder John wrote of this love as God's initiative and of it being centred in Jesus being 'the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:10). Paul emphasised the same theme (Romans 5:8; Galatians 2:20). These testimonies reflect Jesus' words: 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13):

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My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heav'n thereby,
nor yet for fear that loving not
I might forever die;
but for that Thou didst all mankind
upon the cross embrace;
for us didst bear the nails and spear,
and manifold disgrace;

And griefs and torments numberless,
and sweat of agony;
e'en death itself, and all for man,
who was Thine enemy.

Then why, most loving Jesus Christ,
should I not love Thee well?

Not for the sake of winning heav'n,
nor any fear of hell;

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
nor seeking a reward,
but as Thyselv hast loved me,
O ever-loving Lord!

E'en so I love Thee, and will love,
and in Thy praise will sing,
solely because Thou art my God
and my eternal King!⁹

⁹ Attributed to Francis Xavier, Edward Caswall, 'My God, I Love Thee, Not Because,'
https://hymnary.org/text/my_god_i_love_thee_not_because.

God is king

Psalm 145

The LORD is faithful, gracious, just and kind

A psalmist bookends his song with his intention to praise the LORD God each day and ‘forever and ever’ (Psalm 145:1–12, 21). The ongoing themes of the psalmist’s praises include God’s sovereignty, his unsearchable greatness, and the response of his creation to him. These qualities are described in terms of God’s abundant goodness, generosity and caring intimacy, and carry reminders of the Exodus story (Psalm 145:13–20; cf. Exodus 34:6, 7).

An everlasting kingdom

Other psalms also describe God’s sovereignty: God ‘is awesome, a great king over all the earth’ (Psalm 47:2, cf. 103:19). The psalmist declared that God ‘chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves’ (Psalm 47:30). This identification of Israel reinforces the Exodus narrative where Israel was told that they were to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5, 6, cf. 1 Peter 2:9).

Israel reached its peak as a nation with the opening of Solomon’s temple (1 Chronicles 29:10ff; 2 Chronicles 7:11–22), but the seeds of failure were already planted and growing. The Hebrew prophets foresaw a renewed Israel with a new King-Messiah (e.g. Psalm 2; Daniel 7; Isaiah 32, 40, 61; Ezekiel 36, 37).

It was in the stream of these prophecies that John the Baptist baptised in the river Jordan and announced Jesus as the coming Messiah (Luke 3:1ff; cf. 7:28; 9:2; Matthew 4:23; 9:35). Throughout his ministry, Jesus was understood as bringing God’s reign to reality (e.g. Luke 10:17ff, 11:20, 12:32; John 19:14–21). The kingdom of God comes by the Spirit of God (Acts 1:8, 1 Corinthians 4:20, Romans 14:17), poured out by Jesus as ascended Messiah and Son of God (Acts 2:33, cf. Stephen in Acts 7 and 13).

When history is completed, Jesus, as resurrected Lord, will give the kingdom to his Father (Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Revelation 19:6, 16).

Matthew and Mark

The miracle of Christmas

Matthew 1:22, 23

From the Holy Spirit

With media promoting the magic of Christmas, it is easy to forget or misunderstand the miracle of Christmas. The story in Luke's Gospel of the birth of Jesus by Mary may be thought of as unimportant, unnecessary, or simply not true.

The demise of the serpent from the action of Eve's offspring is prophesied immediately after Adam and Eve had sinned (Genesis 3:15). Isaiah told the rebellious king Ahaz to 'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). Matthew saw this second prophecy fulfilled at Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:22, 23).

A virgin conceiving may be possible but is not probable. The idea of a child called Immanuel, God with us, with divine parentage is even more unlikely.

Let's look at Matthew's statement in the context of Luke's narrative. Matthew wrote that the angel told Joseph that the child to be born to Mary would be 'from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1:20). Luke recorded that it was the Holy Spirit's activity in Jesus' birth that made him Son of God (Luke 1:35), so restoring what was lost in the sin of Adam (Luke 3:38; cf. Genesis 3:15).

Born in human likeness

Paul indicated that Jesus, being

in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6–8; cf. Romans 8:3).

All Jesus did, he did as a human person. He showed us that to be truly human is to be filled with the Holy Spirit (e.g. Luke 10:21). He knew himself, and who God is, through the Holy Spirit (cf. Isaiah 11:1ff).

John reported how Jesus came from the Father to explain, make known, and reveal, who and what God is like. Jesus did this since he is God and 'became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:1–18).

Through whom he also created the worlds

The New Testament writers believed the Son of God created the universe (John 1:3–5; Colossians 1:15, 17; Hebrews 1:1–3). The Old Testament witness that creation came to birth by the Holy Spirit (cf. Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6, 104:30;

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Proverbs 8:22–30) provides a context for the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary about divine possibilities:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God (Luke 1:35–37).

Becoming God's family

John wrote of Jesus as God's unknown Word in this world – the world that was created through him:

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:10–12).

This adoption, or new birth, is also miraculous and not natural: The Son of God became human to enable humanity to become God's family (John 3:3–8).¹⁰ Paul explained that it is the Holy Spirit who makes us God's sons and daughters (Romans 8:14–17; cf. Galatians 4:6, 2 Peter 1:4). Paul's statement that 'you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' reinforces Mary's song at Elizabeth's home soon after Gabriel's visit (2 Corinthians 8:9; Luke 1:39–56).

Mary's accepting reply to Gabriel can be our response to the message of Christmas. The miracle of Christmas can mean our new birth, our adoption into God's family, and our obedient journeying in the same way as did the wise men who by-passed Herod's instruction, worshipped Jesus, gave him gifts, and avoided tyranny and cruelty by going home 'by another road' (Matthew 2:12).

Gabriel's message to Mary was just as Isaiah indicated (Isaiah 9, 11):

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over

¹⁰ See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London and Glasgow, UK: Fontana Books, 1971), Book 4, Chapter 5, 150. Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>), (Book III, Chapter 19, 1): He speaks undoubtedly these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption, but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God, defraud human nature of promotion into God, and prove themselves ungrateful to the Word of God, who became flesh for them. For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?

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the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32, 33).

A day is coming when everyone will acknowledge Jesus as sovereign Lord and will worship him (Philippians 2:9–11). The fulfilment of the miracle of Christmas will then be complete!

Time for change!

Matthew 3:1–12

God's reign is near!

John's message of repentance required people to change their minds. Change is often pursued as a virtue – but this is not always true:

Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.¹¹

Though the Bible speaks of God repenting, his repentance is described within the ambit of his own wider covenantal will (cf. Genesis 4:6ff, 6:6ff; Exodus 32:12ff; Numbers 23:19; Judges 2:18–23; Jeremiah 26:13; Joel 2:12–14; Jonah 3:9). When the writer of the book of Hebrews declared that 'Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8), the author did not mean that Jesus is fossilised, but that Jesus was moving consistently towards a sure goal:

For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name (Hebrews 13:14, 15).

As a prayer collect says:

Be present, merciful God, and protect us ... that we, who are wearied by the changes and chances of this fleeting world, may rest on your eternal changelessness; through Christ our Lord.¹²

Given that times for change come to us all, what was John the Baptist's message for change – for repentance – all about? Three main emphases are:

- 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven [God] has come near' (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:15). John's message was that as the king is coming, his listeners were to demonstrate that they belonged to God's family by remembering that trees that do not produce good fruit are removed and burnt (Matthew 3:10; Luke 3:9)!
- Messiah 'will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16ff; Matthew 3:11ff; Mark 1:8ff). Fire in this context refers to refining judgement, and the mention of the Holy Spirit indicates that this divine action is linked with God's righteousness, love, peace and renewal.

¹¹ Henry Francis Lyte, 'Abide with Me,'
https://hymnary.org/text/abide_with_me_fast_falls_the_eventide/fulltexts.

¹² *An Australian Prayer Book*, 33.

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- ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29, 36) relates to John’s message about purity, cleansing, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and release from God’s wrath.

John the Baptist proclaimed a new order, with the old one under judgement and passing away. John was not simply preaching fire and brimstone; he was emphasising the breadth of God’s action through the coming kingdom, Spirit baptism and forgiveness. The edifices of the old era would dismantle and dissolve as they were pathetic and puerile by comparison with the truth of the coming reign of God. Their judgement would be by exposing their inherent falseness, innate deceitfulness and intrinsic delusion (cf. John 1:3–5 where darkness makes no legitimate sense in the light of God’s goodness and life).

Change as a miracle and gift

This miracle of change is still worthwhile pondering over. We cannot easily, if ever, change ourselves, even though we may change some external behaviours. Changing anyone’s mind is not simple, especially when changing our own way of thinking is so unlikely! One New Testament example involves Peter reluctantly going to Caesarea to preach to some non-Jews:

as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ... If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God (Acts 11:15–18)?

Peter’s message to Cornelius that ‘All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name’ links with this summary (Acts 10:43). Cornelius and his household were saved. They entered God’s kingdom, where God judges the ‘living and the dead’ by his grace and mercy (Acts 10:42; 11:14).

Another classic case of this change was the thief on the cross alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39–43). True repentance, then, is a gift where God shows us what he is doing in history, and where he commands us to come under his sovereign reign and care. Advent, a season focusing on Christ’s coming, can be a time to ‘go to the Jordan’ in our hearts and minds, and reaffirm that our sins are washed away by the love and kindness of God (cf. Titus 3:4ff):

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! Precious is the flow that makes me white as snow
No other fount I know – Nothing but the blood of Jesus.¹³

¹³ Robert Lowry, ‘What Can Wash Away My Sin,’ https://hymnary.org/text/what_can_wash_away_my_sin.

Free grace, but not cheap

Matthew 9:9–13

My name is Matthew

Imagine that this is Antioch, late in the first century, and that my name is Matthew. I'm the tax collector in the reading from the Gospel. I was angry about the religious system and was actively expressing my discontent while making some money by working for the Romans who had invaded my country. Despite that, I was intrigued by a man from Nazareth called Jesus, whose ministry contrasted with that practised in the Synagogues. The day you read about was when this Messiah-come-evangelist came past and told me to follow him. It was not a request or an appeal or even an invitation, but a command, and one that had ultimate significance: it was a case of now or never.

Furore arose when he came to my house, especially as I had invited some of my friends around to tell them about my new plans. A reputable preacher does not publicly criticise a divinely decreed religious system, let alone associate with disreputable people like me!

I'll never forget his answer to the verbal deluge from the authorities. How he quoted from Hosea that God prefers mercy, grace and love to religious sacrifices. The irony intrigued me. God initiated a sacrificial system to teach people of his love, but we became so entranced by the system that he had to say *this*. Anyway, Jesus was more concerned with the needy and the wayward than he was with the rituals as they were practised at the Jerusalem temple.

As you can see, that day made quite an impact on me. It reminds me of other events, of how Jesus' mother, Mary, told us of the wise men who followed the star, and of her husband, Joseph, following the angel's instruction and fleeing to Egypt with her and their new-born baby. Then there was the young ruler whose love of his riches kept him from following Jesus. I was stirred by Jesus' comments afterwards that many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

Following Jesus has not been uneventful for me either. I recall the first time that he gave us authority to heal the sick, to drive out demons and to raise the dead. All this was evidence that our message that the reign of God was at our fingertips was authentic. Jesus told us to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves, and not to bother about what to say when – not if – the authorities attacked us. Yet, our motto was to be 'Freely you have received, freely give' (Matthew 10:8 NIV). Free, yes, but not cheap.

The sign of Jonah

I also remember when Jesus started talking about his death, and the way we disciples argued about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. And, how, when he was telling us about his death on another occasion, he explained that those who

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want to follow him need to forget their own ambitions and understand that following him would involve self-sacrifice:

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life (Matthew 16:24–26)?

He referred to his death as the sign of Jonah to a wicked and adulterous generation, and how we knew what a red sky meant but could not interpret the signs of the time. He described our nation as being

like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn’

and contrasted John the Baptist’s restraint with his own lifestyle and suggested that wisdom would be ‘vindicated by her deeds’ (Matthew 11:16–19; cf. Proverbs 1–9).

He spoke of how Sodom and Nineveh would be better off on the day of judgement than Bethsaida and Capernaum, two of our northern cities. And of how our religious leaders fitted Isaiah’s words about the difference between verbal assent to God’s ways and self-glorifying worship, teaching and doctrine (Matthew 15:8, 9). This was consistent with his attitude to our nation’s obsession with temple finances and business, rather than with prayer.

No wonder our religious elite – with the Roman rulers – put him to death. Yet he had reminded us of a psalm about a rejected stone becoming the cornerstone when telling us that God would achieve his purposes by his death (Matthew 21:42; cf. Psalm 118:22).

You may remember how Peter said at the Last Supper that he would follow Jesus anywhere, even to death. We all felt like Peter. But it was just as Jesus told us, using the words of Zechariah’s ancient prophecy, that ‘I [presumably God] will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered’ (Matthew 26:31). The beautiful part of it was that even though we did not follow him to death at that time, that God, through Jesus’ death, enabled us to follow him forever – even if that meant dying like he did. Jesus was saying that, even though the flock would initially be scattered, it would eventually be gathered (cf. Zechariah 13:9b; Matthew 26:32). God, the good shepherd, was and is gathering; the religious and political shepherds were scattering.

Whereas we deserve to be forsaken by God, he experienced our forsakenness. I remember Jesus’ words from the Cross, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me’, and how, in saying that, he expressed his obedience to God without any anger; he was following God’s purpose for him and realising God’s goal for his world (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1ff). He knew all our confusion and all our rebellion, so that we need never be forsaken by God. Yes, it has worked out exactly as he told

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us before he ascended to his Father. He mentioned how he now has authority to go anywhere with us, and that this means God's goodness and love will be shared with all nations (cf. Psalm 22:21–31).

It is as I quoted from Isaiah about God's delight in his Spirit-anointed chosen and beloved servant who will proclaim

justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope (Matthew 12:18–21; cf. Isaiah 42:1–4).

It is also as in Jesus' prayer that his heavenly Father reveals to young children and babies what remains hidden from intelligent and discerning people. Jesus identified himself with these infants and urged those with him to come to him, be like him and find gentleness and rest (Matthew 11:25–30).

Yes, his grace is free, but not cheap.

The sower – switching off and on

Matthew 13:1–23

The word of the kingdom

This is a parable about hearing and not hearing ‘the secrets of the kingdom’; ‘the word of the kingdom’ (Matthew 13:11, 19). In his explanation of the parable to his disciples, Jesus made it plain that the seed that is sown is the gospel, the good news that comes as the word of God, as God’s message.

Even though a sower would have had a reasonable success rate at throwing seed onto the better soil, Jesus devoted much of his explanation to the seed that landed elsewhere. He focused on the seed that fell on the path, on the rocky areas, and among thorns. We must therefore assume that this parable includes a warning about *not* hearing the word of God.

This is backed up by two other facts:

- When Jesus was asked why he used parables, he told them that people are poor listeners. He quoted Isaiah’s saying that people’s hearts were ‘calloused’, and that their ears and eyes were shut (Matthew 13:15 NIV). This, sadly, was their own doing. They chose not to hear God’s message.
- This does not mean that parables were merely vehicles to simplify and illustrate the truth. Luke, in his account of this parable, wrote that ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that “looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.”’ (Luke 8:10). Jesus told parables knowing that some would oppose his message. Just as Adam and Eve were shut out of the garden, so those who refuse God’s message do not know his forgiveness (Mark 4:12) or healing (Matthew 13:15). Salvation includes the healing that flows from forgiveness.

Jesus’ audience included God-fearing people. It is healthy if, as we meditate on this parable, we are concerned about not hearing God’s word. How easy it is for us to go through the motions of Sunday worship, to attend to the church’s business, to work at our day toil, and to not hear God speak to us!

It is helpful to reflect on whether, for example, the Bible is merely a helpful manual of good ideas for daily life that we are happy for others to tell us about. If we are to treat this passage seriously, we must examine ourselves and not presume we are *always* good soil! Even good soil is disturbed when ploughed!

The seed that fell on the path was trampled on and birds ate it up. Jesus likened this to those the devil keeps from being saved. The seed that fell among the rocks lacked nourishment and depth, and when suffering came, and life turned sour, did not survive. This seed refers to hearing initially with joy, but not reaching maturity

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by listening to God's message for and in the tough times of life. The seed that landed in the thorns referred to those who heard God's good news but were more concerned about 'the cares of the world and the lure of wealth' (Matthew 13:22). Possessions can easily become more important than God's message.

Compassion and abundant pardon

We may ask why are these warnings so strong, and what message should we hear? The writer of Hebrews warns us not 'to neglect so great a salvation' (Hebrews 2:1). Jesus told his disciples that his message was one of forgiveness, of healing from having calloused hearts, blind eyes and deaf ears, of being released from obsession with our own welfare, and of being liberated from craving material wealth.

This is what is written about in the book of Isaiah where listeners and readers were urged to search for God while God is nearby. Their explorations were to involve abandoning wickedness, ceasing from untruthful thoughts and returning 'to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon' (Isaiah 55:6–7).

Two gospel stories can help focus this for us:

- Firstly, the woman who poured perfume over Jesus' feet at Simon's house. (Luke 7:36ff, just before Luke's account of this parable.) How easy it is to be like Simon, angry with the seeming excesses of other Christians and not moved to tears by the message of the gospel?
- Secondly, the tax gatherer who prayed in the temple (Luke 18:9–14.) How easy to criticise others – even the Pharisee in this story – and not repent. It was the tax gatherer who went home at peace, and who was exalted by the God who justifies the unjust.

Jesus' parable, and these two stories, remind us that God accepts the sinner, that he receives the wicked person, that he has mercy on the evil doer, and that he pardons the criminal. And that nothing is more significant than hearing God's word and knowing the daily experience of his grace in freely forgiving us of our failures. Let us continue to search the Scriptures to learn the magnificence of God's redeeming love, of how it is that the holy Father-God forgives us, his sinful children. Let us marvel with the prophet:

Who is a God like you, who pardons sins and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry for ever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18–19).

I will build my church

Matthew 16:13–20

Revealing the reign of God

We have seen a decline in the influence of the Australian established church in the last few decades, while, by contrast, some other countries have experienced rapid church growth. What answers to Jesus' first question to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi would people in these different settings give today? Jesus asked a second question: 'But who do you say that I am' (Matthew 16:15)? Answering Jesus' question for ourselves is better than analysing other people's responses.

Peter's answer and Jesus' response to his answer are crucial in different ways. Jesus told Peter that Peter could only make his reply because Jesus' heavenly Father revealed it to him. Peter's confession was not primarily the result of his education, nor of any human insight. It was the direct consequence of divine action in human history. What he confessed was a message from the living God. As such, it was as miraculous as the feeding of the five thousand and the raising of Lazarus. It was the highest revelation a human person can know. Peter confessed that God is Father, that Jesus is his Son, filled with the Spirit of his Father, and that Jesus was the one of whom the prophets spoke.

Jesus declared that he would build his church on this foundation so securely that hell itself would be impotent by comparison. Much theological debate has occurred concerning Jesus' reference to 'this rock' (Matthew 16:18). Was he pointing to Peter's leadership of the church? Was he indicating that Peter's confession is essential for salvation? Whatever case there is for these points of view, one simple observation is that Jesus was referring to the fact of divine revelation! Shortly afterwards, when Peter did not want to see Jesus suffer, Jesus 'turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"' (Matthew 16:23). Crucial to Christ's building of his church is his Father's self-revelation. Churches grow by knowing God as Father, and no-one can know God as Father unless God reveals himself.

It is this revelation that is promised, and which effects heavenly plans in human history. The 'keys of the kingdom' lock and unlock what is already secured in heaven. Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount that we should 'seek his Father's kingdom and his righteousness' (Matthew 6:33). To unlock the kingdom of God in human history is to have a revelation of God as sovereign Father, and that as such, he has not lost control of his creation but, through the death of his Son, has defeated all human evil and rebellion. To enter his kingdom is to be reborn, to be adopted into this Father's family and to know his peace (cf. John 3:1–8, 33–36).

Recognising the reign of God

Jesus stressed this truth in the explanations and events that followed. After Jesus ‘sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah’, he firstly informed his disciples of his coming suffering, death and resurrection (Matthew 16:19–21). Secondly, rather than accept Peter’s rebuke, Jesus insisted that they must follow him by also taking up their own crosses (Matthew 16:22–26). The issues were crucial to Jesus. He made it clear to his disciples that they would see the impact of Christ’s kingdom on human history:

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom (Matthew 16:27–28).

Thirdly, Jesus ‘was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him’ (Matthew 17:1–3). Moses and Elijah (representing the law and the prophets) spoke with him of his coming *exodus* to Jerusalem, and how having been transfigured, he would be disfigured so that we who are disfigured would be transfigured (cf. Luke 9:31). They were being shown that the Son of God became human to enable humanity to become God’s restored and redeemed family.

Jesus asked his disciples questions about who he was understood to be to help bring this truth to the surface. He was telling them that his cross and resurrection were crucial to God’s action in history. Jesus was emphasising God’s perspective that ‘the Son of Man must suffer’, and that Jesus would not build his church, come in his kingdom, or reveal his Father any other way. Recognising Jesus as the Messiah – as God’s anointed one, as God’s Christ, and as the eternal Son of the living God – means recognising the necessity of his crucifixion. The deepest revelation of God as redeemer is that he is Father, and the deepest revelation of his fatherhood is that he is Redeemer (cf. Isaiah 63:16; Matthew 11:25–30).

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:15–20

A serious business

In what ways are we to respond when we believe someone has sinned against us? Luke records Jesus' words on another occasion concerning this theme (Luke 17:3–4). Jesus indicated a process (Matthew 18:15–20). A first step is to 'go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one' (Matthew 18:15). Then, 'if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses' (Matthew 18:16). Thirdly, 'If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church' (Matthew 18:17). Lastly, 'if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector' (Matthew 18:17). As Peter was quick to notice, this process can be tedious, time consuming and unsuccessful (Matthew 18:21).¹⁴

Jesus pointed out that the issue about which we are to be careful involves an eternal verdict. The context of these verses is forgiveness, secured – 'bound' – at the cross, so that those who are reconciled can be 'loosed' on earth from their sins. The Father's action and presence with, and in, his Son relates to those who 'agree on earth about anything you ask' concerning forgiveness, not anything that is asked about anything (Matthew 18:19)!

The actions of those involved in reconciliation are surrounded by God's promise. Action on earth is in the context of action in heaven. This heavenly activity is effective among those seeking reconciliation on earth. The request from earth to heaven is answered from heaven to earth – and is secured in both heaven and earth.

God's response to our sinning against him

In the garden of Eden, Adam was gently shown his fault (Genesis 3:9ff). The prophets established God's testimony against his people (e.g. Exodus 34; Psalm 130; Jeremiah 31). Jesus came directly to them (e.g. John 5:25–26; 8:14–18, 34–38). On the cross, God-in-Christ used our rejection to provide the basis for our acceptance (Luke 23:34, 24:47; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21). Jesus comes to us seeking reconciliation with us and works in and with us so that we ask for, and so come to, God for his forgiveness.

How we are to live

In his letters to the churches, Paul explores what it means to be those who are entrusted with God's message of reconciliation. His message to the Roman church was that they remember that those who love their neighbours as themselves fulfil

¹⁴ Jesus' advice in this passage is about relationships between brothers and sisters and not with those who have power, profile and privilege and who occupy positions of authority.

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the law. Paul urged them to ‘lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light’. They were to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’ (Romans 13:8–14; cf. Ezekiel 33:7–20; 2 Corinthians 5:16–21).

Reconciliation

Matthew 18:15–20

Seeking reconciliation

This Gospel reading tells us of the presence of Christ to two or three gathered in his name. While these verses have encouraged many people, a close reading of the passage indicates that this saying in this context is directed at people gathering for a special reason, and not any congregational meeting. Similarly, the saying that our heavenly Father will do whatever two or three ask him to do, is not a licence for us to demand whatever we want from God.

These two sayings are introduced with the words ‘Truly I tell you’ and ‘Again, I truly tell you’ (Matthew 18:18, 19). They are linked to Jesus’ previous discussion about what to do if someone in the household of God sins against you. Whatever the broader application of these statements may be, they specifically refer to reconciling broken relationships. If two or three people who have been in disunity agree about anything towards their mutual reconciliation, then God our Father will work to secure that harmony. And, likewise, Christ will be present to them in their coming together.

Focusing the central meaning of these verses into their context takes nothing away from them but provides a wonderful basis for Christian reconciliation. And that is certainly an ongoing necessity for us all!

Let us look more closely at Jesus’ instructions. The first point Jesus makes is that ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone’ (Matthew 18:15; cf. Matthew 5:23–24; Luke 17:3–4). When someone sins against us we normally demand of them that they confess their faults. Yet, this instruction is precisely the opposite. Why is this the case? Why is the initiative with the innocent party? Whatever therapeutic reasons there may be for the innocent party acting first, there is one significant theological reason: Jesus’ advice is a practical expression of the divine initiative of the gospel he came to preach.¹⁵

Jesus, standing with those early disciples, was evidence of his Father’s initiative with us. Jesus frequently told his listeners that he had come from his Father to set people free from the terrible bondage of sin and guilt. He proclaimed that his Father continually witnessed to what he was doing and how he was doing exactly what his Father had given him to do (see John 5:31ff, 8:18ff, 10:38).

This is the great evangel, the great gospel message that the angels declared at his birth, and that all the prophets, including John the Baptist, had prophesied about.

¹⁵ Jesus’ advice in this passage needs to be considered in the context of his statements about hierarchy, safety and well-being, and not treated in isolation (cf. Matthew 10:11–14, 16ff).

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This is the message of the reign of God, of which all the miracles were signs. And it is why it was necessary for him to suffer and die. His death was not merely some great symbol – it was the action of God that reconciles us (see Romans 3:25ff, 5:6ff; 2 Corinthians 5:17ff; Ephesians 2:1ff; 1 John 4:9ff). This was the point of Jesus' first word from the cross, and of his resurrection message to his disciples (Luke 23:34 and 24:47).

Abundant forgiveness

There is a difference between forbearance and forgiveness. Forgiveness finds the moment to 'go and point out' (Matthew 18:15). As the next section of Matthew's Gospel indicates, while forgiveness is an act of mercy, it is also time consuming, difficult and costly (Matthew 18:21–34).

In seeking forgiveness, the role of witnesses is critical. Any quick survey of Scripture will find many references to the Holy Spirit as witness, to the Son's works witnessing to his Father, to his Father bearing witness, and to God's testimony through the prophets.

The notion of binding and releasing sets the discussion in a broad context, including biblical themes of covenant, kingdom, reconciliation and peace. The keys of the kingdom to which Jesus referred relate to this binding and releasing (Matthew 16:19).

Jesus, at every point, did what his Father was doing: God as Father reconciles through his Son and the Spirit. This reconciliation was secured by the death of Jesus on the cross (Romans 5; 2 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 2).

Two commands to love

Matthew 22:34–40

Jesus' answer

When Jesus said that 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets', he was not answering their question lightly (Matthew 22:40). They asked for the first commandment among many. They were after a single priority among other options. One option among many more. Jesus gave them not merely a top priority, or two top priorities! He gave them the whole story. He declared the whole law to them! He gave them not only some significant section of the law, but the entire law! And not only the entire law, but the prophets as well!¹⁶ They came with an important but partial request, and one hardly asked in love. He answered with the full compass of God's dealings with humanity – with his people – and our dealings with each other.

We may conclude, therefore, that the essence of the law is love. Love defines the law, and the law defines love. To obey the law is to love, and to love is obey the law. True love means fully obeying God's commandments. Authentic love involves total obedience to God himself. To fracture the law and love is to be spiritually promiscuous. To love other than in the context of total love for God is a form of spiritual adultery which brings judgement.

Jesus' basis

In Deuteronomy 6:1–25, total love to God is enjoined for 3 reasons:

- That it may be well with you, according to God's promise. They were to note the deadly implications of disobedience, both in their own travels in the wilderness, and in the nations around them. There is nothing more human, more appropriate, and more natural than to love God.
- Prosperity and righteousness were intended to be evidence of their earlier deliverance from Egypt. Just as God delivered them then, so he would provide for them now. Their continual obedience was to be the expression of their thankfulness for God's mighty victory over Pharaoh.
- God alone is sovereign. He is one. He is provider, giver and fountain. They were to talk about him around meal tables, walking along streets and in their daily activities because he was their life. This sharing was to be an overflow of thankfulness for the fulfilment of the living God's promises in a land 'flowing with milk and honey' (Deuteronomy 6:3)!

The injunction in Leviticus 19:18 to neighbourly love is an expression of the holiness commanded in Leviticus 19:2. The verses in between expand on this

¹⁶ Jesus does this as personified Wisdom, so reflecting the Hebrew-Jewish *Tanakh*.

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theme by referring to the ten commandments. The message is clear: to be holy is to be pure in love. To be pure in love is to be holy. Love is holiness in action. The author of Leviticus indicated that holiness is pure love acting for the welfare of one's neighbours (Leviticus 19:1–18).

To say that God is one is to see all his being and action as the outpouring of fresh, true, authentic, crystal-clear love, holiness and goodness. To love our neighbours is to live in, by and for him. To love God with our whole being is to be holy, and to be holy is to love God with our whole being.

Jesus' love and holiness

When Jesus stated these commandments to the Pharisees, he was not trying to outwit them. He was revealing himself and his Father. He was there, with them, doing precisely what he was telling them to do. He was loving those who hated him, even in his own death.

Elsewhere Jesus had said that the world must learn that 'I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me'. His message to his disciples was that 'the reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again'. Jesus later commented that love which sacrifices oneself for another is of the highest quality (John 14:31, 10:17, 15:13).

Jesus was the living expression of what he declared. His love for God was with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. Our salvation depended on it. He loved his neighbour as himself. He loved us at the expense of his own life (John 13:1). At every point, Jesus was expressing his Father's love for him. There was little value in Jesus confronting the Pharisees about the law and the prophets unless God had taken the initiative in first loving us, and unless his love is effective in destroying our perverse love – our hate.

Paul wrote that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). The gift of the Spirit of holiness is God's witness to us that Christ has died for the ungodly – for us (Romans 5:8, cf. 1:1–6).

John wrote that the essence of love is 'not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:10). He had already encouraged his readers to observe the wonderful nature of God's love in identifying them as God's family:

What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:1–3).

Keep watch
Matthew 24:37–44

Jesus returns

Jesus urged his listeners to ‘keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord may come’ (Matthew 24:42 NIV). Why were they, and why are we, to keep watch or to ‘keep awake’ (NRSV)? Why are we to be ready? Behind these words of Jesus is a message that God has not lost control of his universe and that he will call us to give account for our lives.

The Scriptures indicate that Jesus returns to be with us now, in and by the Holy Spirit, and that he has done so since Pentecost. This coming to be with us now is ‘always, to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20). His current revelation of himself through the Spirit guarantees his coming at the end of history. This suggests a double point. There is the end to our personal history, and there is an end to all history (cf. Ephesians 1:13, 14).

There are at least three aspects to Jesus’ return following his ascension. He is present continually with his people now, he comes to us at our death at an ‘unexpected hour’, and he is coming at the end of history at an ‘unexpected hour’ (Matthew 24:44).

We all come face to face with the God who is sovereign over his universe. It is this God who spoke to Moses saying he is eternally merciful, gracious, forbearing, loving and faithful – all without compromising his integrity and identity (Exodus 34:6, 7; cf. Deuteronomy 6:1–8).

We face the uncertainty of our own lives and the certainty of God’s judgement. We face Jesus’ urgent demand that we be ready since some are taken to be with the Son of Man and others are left alone.

Being ready

How can we watch and be awake? In what ways can we be ready? Paul urged his readers to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’ (Romans 13:14). Being ready means clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and not gratifying our physical cravings. Paul further developed this theme in another letter (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

If we think we will ‘inherit the kingdom of God’, then on what basis will this occur? It will not be because of what we think we have done (cf. Isaiah 48). We are to keep watch by living daily knowing God’s love and holiness come to us unconditionally as his grace, requiring nothing of us but to receive it. His salvation is total and free. It is his, and he freely gives it to us. How tragic that we think we can save ourselves by ourselves!

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As Paul told the Athenians, the creator-God is celestially and terrestrially sovereign without needing to habitat human sanctuaries and without needing to rely on eternal assistance ‘since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things’. God, by contrast, ‘has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:24–31).

John’s Gospel introduces Jesus washing his disciples’ feet at his last supper with them by commenting that ‘he loved them to the end’ (John 13:1). We need only respond as Peter eventually did (John 13:9 cf. 1 Corinthians 6:11).

Jesus urged us to be ready. The Son of Man who comes as our judge is the same one who takes us through the judgement as our saviour. God’s goal in Jesus was salvation not condemnation (John 3:14–17). In Jesus’ death on the cross, God has loved us by taking our judgement into himself.

God’s unconditional offer to us is eternal life in Jesus Christ (cf. John 3:16). God’s grace has no strings attached. It cost Christ his all *and* it comes freely to us. We are to watch and be ready when the Son of Man comes – whether he comes now by his Spirit, at our death, or at the end of history. Being alert to his coming is being awake to his gifts of grace and mercy (cf. Ephesians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:6–10; Revelation 16:15).

The sheep and the goats

Matthew 25:31–46

Royal shepherd

The Son of Man is the king who sits ‘on the throne of his glory’, the good shepherd who separates ‘people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and [who puts] the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left’ (Matthew 25:31–33).

People are separated from within the nations. The passage does not suggest unilateral racial or ethnic discrimination, even of the kind attributed to God in the Hebrew Bible. God also does not see us as isolated individuals, but as ‘people-persons’, as in the great commission in Matthew 28, where Jesus sends his disciples to disciple the nations. The focus in this passage is on people in the nations, rather than just nations or individuals.

Separation: commendation and condemnation

Three themes are evident in the verses that follow (Matthew 25:34–46):

Those on the right	Those on the left
are ‘blessed by my Father, [and] inherit the kingdom prepared for [them] from the foundation of the world’ (Matthew 25:34).	‘are accursed, [and] depart from [the Son of Man] into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (Matthew 25:41).
Commended for meeting the needs of the needy (Matthew 25:35–36).	Condemned for not meeting the needs of the needy Matthew 25:42–43).
Unaware of the significance of their actions (Matthew 25:37–40).	Unaware of the significance of their actions (Matthew 25:44–46).

An Old Testament context for the parable is Ezekiel 34, especially 34:17–24.

The nature of God’s justice may seem strange. The failures of the righteous are covered by their faithfulness, and any virtues of the unrighteous are polluted by their unfaithfulness. The parable argues that while doing well is appropriate, what is or is not done is a primarily a matter of faithfulness or unfaithfulness – whether people faithfully cared for the needy, and so cared for Christ (who is with the needy). Neither the sheep nor the goats were aware of what they had or had not done, making it clear that the parable is not to be used for motivating good works, but for encouraging faithful living.

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The basic point of the story is not that we had better consciously do good –we had, but not primarily because of this parable – but that the sheep belong to the good shepherd, and that he covers their failures and fulfils their needs. He alone meets human needs, and those who recognise his help respond to him and others with self-giving generosity and patient humility.

Jesus – the Son of Man – is the shepherd who fulfils passages such as Isaiah 61, Psalm 23 and John 10. Jesus said much about the Father's faithful generosity to his children, and of our calling to do the 'will of my Father who is in heaven' in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7ff, 7:21ff, cf. 6:4ff, 14ff, 25ff).

A key question raised by this parable, and which determines our actions towards other people, is how we see God. Do we see God the Father – and his Son – as gracious and generous towards humanity or as harsh and legalistic over humanity?

God's election

Mark 1:1–8

Prophetic anticipations

Election campaigns have policy speeches! When Jesus came as Messiah, Christ, he came with a 'policy' from his Father that declared God's politics to be different from human politics.¹⁷ The messages of John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, included at least three dominant themes:

- the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; cf. John 1:29).
- the presence of God's kingdom (Mark 1:3; cf. Matthew 3:1, 2).
- a baptism with/in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; cf. Luke 3:16).

John did not make up these themes. They were evident in Isaiah 40 where God spoke words of restorative comfort and tenderness to God's people because of God's forgiveness for their sinfulness (Isaiah 40:2). The coming of God's reign was seen to include a revelation of God's glory which would bring people together. This good news meant that God 'will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep' (Isaiah 40:11).

The nations, by contrast 'are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as dust on the scales'. God 'stretches out the heavens like a curtain, ... spreads them like a tent to live in; [and] brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing' (Isaiah 40:15, 23).

The ongoing action of the Holy Spirit contrasts the passing transience of plants and is linked with the divine word which stands forever (Isaiah 40:6–8):

Who has directed the spirit of the LORD, or as his counsellor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding (Isaiah 40:13, 14)?

These three strands are linked together in Isaiah 42:1–4. God's servant is anointed with God's spirit and implements God's justice internationally without violence or growing weary. The fact that the 'coastlands wait for his teaching' suggests that they have been reconciled to God and forgiven of their failures (cf. Isaiah 33:17–24, 40:1ff).

¹⁷ cf. Jaques Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972); *Meaning of the City, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997); *Judgment of Jonah, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, c1971).

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These three themes were evident at Jesus' birth. Matthew 1:21 and Luke 1:17, for example, relate to forgiveness and reconciliation, while Luke 1:32 and 33 (cf. Matthew 2:2) record the angel Gabriel saying to Mary that Jesus

will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Mary was also told that 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you' (Luke 1: 35, cf. 1:15, 41, 2:25ff).

Promised accomplishments

These themes were affirmed by Jesus before his death. God's Advocate will come and confirm that sin is essentially unbelief and unrighteousness – it is a failure to acknowledge Jesus' return to the Father as Lord over death and this world's evil ruler (John 16:8–11).

Jesus linked God's reign and covenant with the forgiveness of sins during his final meal with his disciples (Matthew 26:28; cf. Luke 22:29; John 12:31, 14:17, 26, 16:8, 33).

These themes were fulfilled by Jesus in and by his death on the cross (Luke 23:34–47; Matthew 27:46–54; John 19:26–30). There is full accomplishment in the 'now' and the 'then' (John 20:21–23; Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:3b–7; Mark 16:15, 19; Matthew 28:18–20). No wonder Peter warns us about God's promises and the final consummation of history in the 'day of God' (2 Peter 3:9–13). At Jesus' first coming, and at his cross, humanity rejected his 'policy', but God used our rejection to confirm his election of us as his people. God's elective love is our deepest comfort. Outside of his love there can be no good news, but where is there that is external to his love as creator, saviour and sovereign?

I have come to preach
Mark 1:29–39

Who comes?

Jesus is the Word not only with God as the Father's Son, but as living humanity among us, making God known (John 1:1–18). This means that all he did, including his healings and exorcisms, were part of his preaching (Mark 1:29–39). His proclamation was who he was and what he did, as well as what he said! The impact and results of his preaching align with the delight of the psalmist. What was true for the LORD God of the psalmist, is also true for 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1).

The LORD God, as creator, 'keeps faith forever' by helping those who hope in him. He 'executes justice for the oppressed', feeds those who are malnourished, releases prisoners, gives sight to blind people, exalts those who are humiliated and 'loves the righteous':

The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD (Psalm 146:5–10; cf. Luke 4:18, 19)!

Who benefits?

Paul outlined something of the impact of this message on his own ministry (1 Corinthians 1:17–25, cf. 2:1–5, 15:3–5; Romans 1:15ff). He saw us as experiencing God's refusal to endorse our self-justifying works. Through reliance on (by faith in) the grace of God we receive the righteousness that takes us safely to and through this judgement. Our calling is clear:

To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (1 Corinthians 9:22; cf. Galatians 6:12–15; Philippians 3:7ff).

This means that we are to serve each other using the gifts we have been given as 'good stewards' of God's multi-faceted grace. God, whose glory and power are eternal, is 'glorified in all things through Jesus Christ' when those who speak say God's words and those who serve do so in God's strength (1 Peter 4:10, 11).

Our sharing of 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' is not only linked with who we are, but also relates to what we do, and to how we do it. It is not only who we are, what we do, and how we do it, but how and what we say as well – whether we come as preachers, teachers, pastors or ministers, or whether we come for another reason (cf. Ephesians 4:1–16)!

The riches of poverty

Mark 10:17–30

A conflict of interest

Mark describes Jesus' encounter with the rich man happening as Jesus 'was setting out on a journey'. He 'ran up and knelt before him' but, on hearing Jesus' reply to his question, 'was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions' (Mark 10:17–22).

Jesus commented to his disciples that entering God's kingdom was difficult for wealthy people because being saved depended on divine rather than human possibilities (Mark 10:23–27).

Jesus had spoken about earthly and heavenly treasures in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19–24). He warned of the temptation of wanting bigger barns to 'store up treasures' while not being 'rich toward God' (Luke 12:13–21). He went on to speak about it being 'the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom', and that our hearts will be in the same place as our treasures (Luke 12:32–34). The story of the rich man and Lazarus develops a similar theme (Luke 16:19–26).

God's business

God is in the business of giving, not possessing; of giving, not grasping. Jesus' life was one of emptying himself; of becoming poor not rich (Philippians 2:7; 2 Corinthians 8:9). His life of poverty and service was dynamic, full and rich! It should not surprise us that Jesus discussed his sufferings and death immediately after this story (Mark 10:32–45).

If our hearts are set on worldly wealth, how can we properly comprehend the gospel? How can we know that 'God will fully satisfy [our] every need ... according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:19)? The needs of which Paul wrote as being satisfied were not primarily material provisions – though he expressed appreciation for the practical concerns and generosity of the Philippian church – but peace and contentment:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ... I can do all things [relating to joy, gentleness, contentment and peace] through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:10–13, cf. 4–9).

How can we know Christ's riches unless we recognise our own poverty (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1–9)? Yet it is when we see his riches that we truly confess our poverty (cf. Revelation 3:14–22)! The riches of poverty are very different to a poverty of riches!

God's gift

Our true worth – our eternal life – is in the Lamb of God:

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing (Revelation 5:12)!

Our inheritance is a divine gift (cf. Matthew 25:34–37). It is a gift that is given to children, as the story immediately preceding Jesus' encounter with the wealthy man indicates. Those bringing children to Jesus so that he could lay hands on them and bless them were aligned with the nature of God's kingdom:

Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it (Mark 10:13–16).

Eternal life is like physical life. It can only be received as a gift, and not secured as a purchase.

Other Letters

But we see Jesus

Hebrews 2:5–9

Human being

Humanity is described in Genesis 1 as God's ultimate creation, the climax of what God created. Only God himself is greater than his image, and God's image is male and female together. We are created to reflect God in God's creation by ruling without exploitation and filling without overwhelming (Genesis 1:28–29; 2:8–17; cf. Ephesians 4:10). Luke 3:38, in describing Adam as 'son of God', identifies humanity as God's family. Psalm 8, in telling us what God thinks about humanity, says that God cares for humanity, crowns humanity, gives humanity authority and visits humanity (cf. Job 7:17–18).

Christ was bringing fulfilment to people throughout his ministry. Hebrews 2 indicates that this fulfilment is ongoing. Christ, 'now crowned with glory and honour', continues to fulfil humanity even though God's positive blessings become humanity's negative struggles because of humanity's rebellion against God. This conflict can be understood by comparing these biblical passages:

- Paul's exhortation that the Philippians focus on truth, honour, justice, purity, delight and affirmation – 'if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things' (Philippians 4:8).
- The invitation of the 'Spirit and the bride' for those who are thirsty to come and 'take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22:17).
- The prophet's announcement that water, wine and milk are available without charge for 'everyone who thirsts' (Isaiah 55:1).

with these passages:

- The writer of Genesis describing the LORD seeing extensive, ongoing human evil and wickedness (Genesis 6:5, cf. 11:6b).
- The sage describing righteous people who 'give way before the wicked' as muddied springs or polluted fountains (Proverbs 25:26).
- Jeremiah's record of God's lament about his people's double evil in abandoning him and then digging out 'cracked cisterns that can hold no water' (Jeremiah 2:13).

God's action

God remains constant in being who God is. The fall did not surprise God: God continued to do and to be what God was already doing and being (cf. Genesis 3:9–21). Who God is and what God does is clear:

- The unknown author of Hebrews wrote that it was appropriate for God as creation's source and goal to enable his family to be glorified, and to do so

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by perfecting ‘the pioneer of their salvation … through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father’ (Hebrews 2:10, 11).

- The testimony in John’s Gospel to God’s love for the world in giving his only Son so that those who believe in him can live eternally (John 3:16).
- Paul’s declaration that God validated his love for us in Jesus dying for us ‘while we still were sinners’ (Romans 5:8).

It might be argued that the language of the suffering servant passage speaks of the suffering of Israel’s covenant God, and not just the suffering of his servant. Where is the LORD’s joy in laying ‘the iniquity of us all’ on his servant, or in crushing his servant with pain or by making his servant’s life an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:6–10)?

The author of Hebrews emphasised that Jesus suffered as God’s Son:

- Jesus, by God’s grace, was crowned with glory and honour for, and because of his suffering and death for everyone.
- Jesus shared the same humanity as God’s family so that he might ‘destroy the one who has the power of death’ by his own death and liberate everyone enslaved by their fear of death.
- Jesus, having ‘become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God’, made ‘a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people’ and so ‘is able to help those who are being tested’ (Hebrews 2:9–18; cf. Psalm 8, Luke 3:38).

Jesus, as a man, fulfils all that humanity was intended to fulfil, and so fulfils what we are created to fulfil. Jesus not only fulfils it for himself, but for us all. We may miss the full depths of his suffering if we only see this in rational terms: his tears in Gethsemane, his hauling of his cross up to Golgotha, the nails being driven through the hands and feet, and the jeering of the multitude as he hung naked before them. All this, and he remained innocent. But there is more than legal innocence, there is his liberating love: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34). This incredible request was linked with his suffering: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

The passage from Hebrews suggests that his cries are best seen in the context of God being aware of humanity, of Jesus tasting death for humanity, and of him rendering powerless the evil one who *had* the power of death. Jesus, in dying as a faithful priest, offered himself as a perfect sacrifice. He was not an unwilling or reluctant sacrifice but was helping ‘those who are being tested’ (Hebrews 2:18, cf. 4:16, 13:6).

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Every vile thought, every rebellious act, every transgression that anyone has ever done in all history was all hideously directed in one staggering attack on one perfect person. All our sins were extinguished, exhausted, obliterated and eliminated forever from all of creation in him. This cosmic victory was achieved by the obedience and humility of Jesus in his death. Sin did its worst to him and was finished in him. God did his best, finishing sin in his Son: 'It is finished' was the dying Jesus' declaration of victory (John 19:30). Sin could not defeat sinless humanity. A sinless human defeated human sin in humanity. Jesus in that sense was not killed by sin; he killed sin and committed himself to his Father's care, whose gracious will he had accomplished. His victory was demonstrated in his death and through his resurrection.

Our response

No wonder we are warned not to neglect 'so great a salvation' (Hebrews 2:3). We are not to be side-tracked by our concerns. Our priority is in being filled with God's Spirit and crying 'Abba Father', and so in being perfected by God's Spirit in God's love (Romans 8, Galatians 4).

Hosea encouraged his generation to

return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up ... that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the ... spring rains that water the earth (Hosea 6:1–3).

Disciplined as God's children

Hebrews 12:5-13

Enduring trials

The story of Job comes to mind when trials and sufferings are mentioned. The book of Job introduces Job's sufferings with the LORD asking the Accuser

Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil (Job 1:8).

Job was chosen to show that true faith does not rely on God bribing us, but on fearing God and refraining from evil. From this perspective, Job, not God, was being tested, with Job under scrutiny because of his relationship with God.

The passage in Hebrews is a commentary on Proverbs 3, where the author wrote in a father-son context and urged his son to have Job-like trust in God, and to see difficulties in terms of divine discipline (Proverbs 3:5–12).

In a third passage relating to discipline, Jesus' invitation for weary people to come to him follows his announcing woe to several Galilean communities because of their poor responses to the 'deeds of power' he had done in them (Matthew 11:16–24). Like the stories of Job and the father in Proverbs 3, Jesus made his comments about discipline in the context of his relationship with his Father. Jesus said that his Father is pleased to share himself with those to whom his Son reveals him, and then adds his invitation for people to take his yoke of sonship and discipline as the recipe for relief from weariness and realisation of rest (Matthew 11:25–30).

Learning obedience

Discipline is seen as discipleship in Matthew 11, where it is set in the context of Jesus' sonship. This sonship is learnt from the Son, who 'for the joy set before him endured the cross', and who 'learned obedience through the things he suffered' (Hebrews 12:2, 5:8).

Discipleship is not meant to explain suffering or to give reasons for difficulties, troubles and transience. It focuses us on being God's family and knowing that discipleship is submission to God as Father, and that we receive true life from God our Father through his Son (Hebrews 12:9–11).

While God's discipline does not explain our trials, it works in them for our good, and causes us to so 'share in his holiness' that we produce 'a harvest of righteousness and peace' (Hebrews 12:9–11).

Straight paths

The author of Hebrews urges God's people to 'lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet' so that they

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might be healed. The writer encouraged them to seek peace with everyone, to aspire ‘to the holiness without which no one will see the Lord’, to make every effort to receive God’s grace, and to avoid any ‘root of bitterness [that] springs up and causes trouble’ and results in corruption (Hebrews 12:12–15).

This was the essence of God’s message to Job (Job 38:1ff, 40:7ff). The writer of Proverbs similarly detailed the need to be vigilant about living with a heart that is true to ‘the springs of life’ and so is focused on avoiding evil (Proverbs 4:23–27).

These thoughts are echoed in the second half of Isaiah where a voice calls out

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ... Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isaiah 40:3–5).

God is described comforting his people in ways that are aligned with the picture of the creator-God in Job 38ff (Isaiah 40:28–31).

These passages teach about God adopting us into his family. Jesus indicated that we will not be abandoned as orphans but will receive a full inheritance as God’s family (John 14:18). Though our trials and sufferings are not explained, we become wonderfully transformed through them (Romans 8:14–17).

We have been adopted into God’s family through the sufferings and death of Jesus, and it is in that reality that we are called to live (John 1:12, 1 John 3:1–3 Galatians 3:26–4:7; Hebrews 2:10–18).

The necessity of asking

James 4:1–10

True asking

Jesus spoke of his disciples doing ‘greater works’ than he was doing (John 14:12). James suggested we quarrel because selfishness prevents us asking, and that even when we do ask, we do not get what we want because of wrong motives. We may fail to receive because we are acting selfishly and seeking pleasure. James wrote that ‘you do not have because you do not ask’, and then immediately stated that ‘You ask and do not receive’, inferring that true asking receives (James 4:2–3).

Unanswered prayer is a significant problem for many people. We may readily conclude that God is remote and not interested, or that God is a reluctant giver. We may blame God for not answering, but James declared that

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17).

Do we see God as children sometimes see their parents? Children ask and do not always get a positive response! They may persist and work out how to ask so they do receive what they want! Do we think God wants us to know his will for us? In calling us his children, does God expect us to be autonomous or dependent upon him?

Our method of asking God may involve working out what we think is best, ask God to bless that, and then complaining if God does not do what we want (James 4:2–6). God’s method is different. James urged his readers to submit and draw near to God, to have clean hands and pure hearts, and to be single-minded. Resisting the devil would cause the devil to flee, while lamenting and mourning were preferable to light-hearted laughter and merriment. Humility ‘before the Lord’ would lead to being exalted, while, by implication, being self-exalted would lead to humiliation (James 4:7–10).

True wisdom

When we ask for help to resist spiritual evil, God will draw near and exalt us, although this may not be as we expect. Being aware of God’s presence leads to praising God for what God is doing. Prayer therefore involves learning God’s will and asking God for it. This is not fatalistic, nor is it a means of securing actual outcomes. Prayer is part of God’s action in redeeming and restoring us and his creation. According to James, God answers prayer for wisdom (James 1:5; cf. Luke 11:9–13; Matthew 7:7–11; Romans 8:26–39).

God’s words to Solomon at the dedication of the first temple speak of God’s redemptive restoration (2 Chronicles 7:13, 14). We belong to God’s house and are

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his people. The empty cross tells us that the risen Jesus has ascended to his Father and comes to us by the Holy Spirit. He is here, bringing good news to the poor, releasing those in bondage, giving sight to the blind, setting the down-trodden free, and proclaiming God's favour and blessing (Isaiah 61:1ff).

We can come now to God our heavenly Father, through his Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, by his Holy Spirit, and we can keep asking until we know we are in his will and are at peace that we will receive according to his will. We can be sure that God 'gives all the more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble"' (James 4:6; cf. Proverbs 3:33–35). James' emphasis was on God's blessings, on God's grace and honour, and not on changing actual events.

Chosen by God

1 Peter 1:1–9

Those who truly preach the gospel do so by the Holy Spirit. According to Peter, even angels long to investigate this message. Peter wrote to those who are chosen by God to participate in ‘these things’ (1 Peter 1:12 NIV). The problems and pains of life may too readily distract us from what Peter says it means for us to be chosen by God.

The nature of God’s choice

Peter wrote that God’s choice is ‘according to the foreknowledge of God the Father’ (1 Peter 1:2 NIV). This means Father-God determining his purposes as originator of all things before the world began (cf. Acts 17:23–28), planner of all things (Ephesians 1:4, 10), and redeemer ‘from of old’ (Isaiah 63:16). God is not some great force or remote ruler; he is Father (Job 7:17; Psalm 8; Luke 3:38). Being Father does not limit his divinity (Acts 17:25). The world would be lonely and cold without him, in fact it would not exist at all.

This choice is enacted ‘through the sanctifying work of the Spirit’ (1 Peter 1:2 NIV). The Holy Spirit was active in creation (cf. Genesis 1:3, 2:4; Psalm 33:6) and sustains our every breath (cf. Job 34:14, 15). It is by the Holy Spirit that we hear the gospel (1 Peter 1:12). It is the Holy Spirit who comes with the Father and the Son to sanctify every part of us; washing, cleansing and purifying us (cf. Jeremiah 17:13; John 7:37–39; Titus 3:5; Proverbs 4:23, 25:26 and Matthew 15:18–20). This sanctification ensures we receive an ‘inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading’ (1 Peter 1:4).

Having identified the basis of God’s choice and way God achieves his purposes, Peter indicated that the outcome of God’s choice is ‘obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood’ (1 Peter 1:2 NIV). Jesus is the man from Nazareth, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Saviour, the Servant, the King of God’s kingdom, and the Lord of earthly rulers. The foreknowledge of God the Father and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit are ‘for obedience’ (1 John 5:3, 4; John 13:34, 14:15–31; 15:12–17) and accomplished ‘by his blood’ (Hebrews 9:11–14, 10:19–22).

The result of God’s choice

Peter went on to write that

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:6–7; cf. Matthew 10:22–40; 2 Corinthians 4:7–11, 11:23–33; 12:7–10).

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It is easy to be dominated by our difficulties rather than by God's choice of us in Jesus Christ (cf. Philippians 2:1–8, 2 Corinthians 8:9). We then miss the purpose Peter saw being achieved through 'various trials' (1 Peter 1:6):

These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Peter 1:7 NIV).

Peter further describes this precious, genuine and imperishable faith:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:8–9).

This faith involves loving Christ without ever having seen him in this life (cf. 1 John 3:1, 2; 4:10, 19; cf. Jesus' encounter with Thomas in John 20:24–29). It results in 'indescribable and glorious joy' in Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 8:8; 1 John 1:4; Hebrews 12:2). God's gracious and merciful choice of us results 'in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed', a promise validated in the present as 'you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls' (1 Peter 1: 9; cf. Revelation 19:5–7; 21:1–4).

Suffering: the path to glory

1 Peter 4:13

The way of the king

Peter urged his readers to have the same intention as Jesus had when he suffered. They were to do God's will as long as they were alive even while enduring the unsurprising 'fiery ordeal' that was severely testing them. This perspective would help them understand that their experiences were not 'something strange', and to encourage them to

rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.

They were to glorify God if they suffered as Christians and were not to consider what was happening to them as being disgraceful. Those who suffered 'in accordance with God's will' were to 'entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good' (1 Peter 4:1–19).

The sufferings Jesus knew occurred because of the way he lived life. He did God's will by doing good to those he met (cf. Acts 10:36–43). Jesus lived as the king of righteousness prophesied in the first section of Isaiah (Isaiah 32:1, 2). The second section of Isaiah developed this theme (Isaiah 42:1–4). The appearance of this servant is described as 'marred' (Isaiah 52:14–15) and his message was unlikely to be believed (Isaiah 53:1). He saw the servant as a 'young plant' in 'dry ground' with 'nothing in his appearance that we should desire him'. Worse than that, this servant was ridiculed and rejected in his suffering and frailty and considered inconsequential.

He was thought of as 'stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted' (Isaiah 53:2–8). God's servant's sufferings were so that other people could be forgiven, restored and healed. This sacrificial action was the LORD's initiative and so was not against his servant, but that recovery might come to God's people through his servant's sacrifice.

As a result, God's servant would see God's restored family, live a long life, and see LORD's will flourish: 'Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge'. He will 'have a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong' (Isaiah 53:4–10).

The New Testament writers adapt and apply this perspective of the suffering servant to Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul wrote that although rich, Jesus became poor to enrich us. In Philippians 2:6–11, Paul declared that Jesus emptied himself, became obedient unto death, and was exalted by God. Hebrews 5:7–9 states that

Jesus learned obedience through suffering, while Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was ahead.

The way of the kingdom

Everyone in God's family suffers from living in God's kingdom (cf. Matthew 5:10–16; John 15:17–20; Luke 20:9–18, 2 Corinthians 4:7–11). In Romans 8:18ff, Paul indicated that all creation is under God's rule, and eagerly awaits the liberation of God's family. As we suffer, God's Spirit brings us the first-fruits of future glory. Our future is secured by and in Jesus Christ, and, despite the intensity of the battle, we are more than conquerors (cf. Romans 8:37–39; Philippians 4:20, 21; Revelation 2 and 3).

In Hebrews 2:8ff, we are informed that we are in conflict since all things are not yet subject to redeemed humanity. Jesus was made lower than the angels but is now crowned with glory because he tasted death for us. As the pioneer of our salvation, he was perfected through suffering, and was made like us in every way so that we, through his atonement, may be like him in every way. He suffered when he was tempted and can help us in every situation that we face, and in every difficulty that we experience.

Our best response is to look to Jesus as the trailblazer of our faith who endured and ignored the shame of being crucified 'for the sake of the joy that was set before him' and is now enthroned at God's right hand (Hebrews 12:2). We are encouraged in this way not to grow weary (Hebrews 12:3), but to be thankful (Hebrews 12:28, 29).

Early in Peter's first letter, Peter urged his readers to rejoice even if they were suffering as their difficulties were refining the 'genuineness' of their faith and would 'result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed'.

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:6–9).

We should not be surprised or ashamed about life's disappointments but trust our faithful Creator and continue 'to do good' (1 Peter 4:19). We will suffer as part of the process by which Christ's victory is won and his kingdom is established (cf. Matthew 5:9–13; John 16:8–11; 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10). We can be encouraged by hearing Jesus's advice to seek God's reign as our primary (and only) priority and to focus on our immediate circumstances (Matthew 6:19–34).

Luke and Acts

The cross and the crib

Luke 1:1–55

Anticipation

Christmas Eve anticipates Jesus' birth. The day after Christmas looks back on Jesus' birth, and forward to his final coming.

The second Genesis creation narrative includes an account in which God reveals the fruits of primal failure. These consequences include pain in childbirth and the destructive nexus of male domination and female servitude. Her partner was told that the ground was cursed because

you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it',

bringing toil, sweat, thorns and thistles.¹⁸ Along with everyone else, her partner would die and return to the dust:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:17–19).

The serpent and its offspring were now at long-term enmity with the woman and her offspring. Her seed would strike the serpent's head, while the serpent's seed would strike the heel of the woman's seed. Eve would be the 'mother of all living' in more than a biological sense (Genesis 3:14–20). Death would reign until someone comes, born of a woman (with no direct reference to a male partner), who would, while enduring suffering inflicted by the serpent, defeat death.

God indicated to Cain that there were blessings in Cain doing well. Otherwise sin would overcome him. Jesus referred to the prophets 'from Abel ...', reminding his listeners of Cain's murder of his brother (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51; cf. Hebrews 11:4, 12:24). After Abel's death, God began a family, a holy people, through Seth, whose son's birth caused people to call on the LORD (Genesis 4:25, 26, 5:3–6; cf. 1 Chronicles 1:1; Luke 3:38).

Enoch's godliness was so powerful that God took him. Noah, with whom the LORD made a covenant, found grace and favour in God (Genesis 6:8–8:22). Although Abram had no son when he left his original homeland, God promised him a future in which his descendants would return to his new homeland after a lengthy time in Egypt. God's covenant with Abraham stated that 'I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless' and 'I will ... be God to you and to

¹⁸ Adam was created to listen to his wife and Eve was created to listen to him, both of them in their one-flesh mutually as creations of the LORD God, and as God's image (cf. Genesis 1:26–31, 2:18–24). Adam's problem was in *what* he listened to about the forbidden tree and not *who* he listened to.

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your offspring after you' (Genesis 17:1–7). Abraham's grandson, Jacob, spoke of a future son whose rule people would obey (Genesis 49:10), while Moses, who after crossing the Red Sea had received God's law, spoke of a great prophet (Exodus 20:1–3; Deuteronomy 18:13–15). Centuries later, David, as Israel's ruler, sang of a coming messianic king (Psalm 2).

Before the Israelites went into exile in Babylon, their prophets prophesied of a new covenant of peace with this Messiah as king, and under which sins would be forgiven, and God's Spirit would be poured out and bring renewal and restoration (cf. Isaiah 9:2–7; Malachi 4:1–6).

Arrival

This Old Testament narrative speaks of a holy God who delights in goodness – a goodness which means sin is deadly and not life-giving. A day was prophesied when this divine goodness will be acknowledged by all peoples, and on that day, Messiah, anointed by God's Spirit, will judge rightly against the 'rich' and in favour of the 'poor' (Luke 1:50–55).

Under Messiah's reign, God's people will be gathered into God's kingdom, filled with God's Holy Spirit and forgiven (Luke 1:68–79).

This is the essence of the angels' messages to Mary (Luke 1:31–33), Zechariah (Luke 1:13–17), Joseph (Matthew 1:21, 23), and the shepherds (Luke 2:10–12). It is central to the responses of Mary (Luke 1:46–55), Zechariah (Luke 1:68–79), Simeon (Luke 2:29–32) and Anna (Luke 2:38). Is it any wonder that John the Baptist came preaching *this* gospel (cf. Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:4–8), commanding people to 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (Matthew 3:2), declaring that 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29), and that this one's power was such that 'he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16)?

The crib at Christmas becomes the cross at Easter, demonstrating God's holiness, establishing his righteousness, and destroying evil. There we see the love of the Lord before whom 'every knee shall bend' (Philippians 2:9–11).

Nothing is impossible with God

Luke 1:26–38

Barrenness

Barrenness featured significantly for Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth.

Abram had no children by Sarah when God told him he would become the father of many nations, a source of blessings to ‘all the families of the earth’, and the father of as many descendants as there are stars in heaven (Genesis 12:1ff). Later, when ‘The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre’ through three visitors, and told him Sarah would have a son, Sarah overheard and laughed in disbelief (Genesis 18:12–14).¹⁹

One day, when Hannah was praying at Shiloh, she was ‘deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly as she was praying concerning her barrenness’ (1 Samuel 1:10). Eli the priest noticed her and thought she was drunk.²⁰ God heard Hannah’s prayer and Samuel was born. Elkanah, Hannah’s devoted and devout husband, assisted in preparing Samuel for his life of service and ministry (1 Samuel 1:19–27, 2:11).

Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, was a priest, ‘chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense’. When he was ‘in the sanctuary’ an angel appeared to him. He was told to not be afraid (Luke 1:13–17). There was a double meaning in God hearing his prayer: in offering incense, he was praying for the people, as well as for himself. Both prayers were ‘heard’ with God’s personal answer to his prayer related to God’s answer to his people’s prayers.

Fruitfulness

These women were women of prayer and their sons were destined for special callings in the purposes of God. Their stories point to God’s concern for the needy, the poor and the destitute and not to their moral failure or human weakness. Jesus also came to the sick and the sinful to heal and restore. While we declare God’s powerfulness (as in Psalms 115 and 135), we too may be surprised when barrenness changes to fruitfulness.

A description of a woman who had never ‘been in labour’ illustrates the fruitfulness of God’s suffering servant (Isaiah 53:10, 54:1–3). The first section of the book of Isaiah describes God’s promise to Ahaz and records a prophecy that seasons of judgements would come to an end (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6). Israel had earlier

¹⁹ Sarah’s incredulity needs to be considered in the context of her faithfulness and devotion (cf. 1 Peter 3:1–7), noting Abraham’s poor behaviour was accompanied with times of honour and affection, suggesting that his response to being called lord was not to call her servant but a title equivalent to lord!

²⁰ Perhaps Eli was more expectant of finding drunkenness than fervent prayer in God’s house!

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been taught that they should trust God for blessings. They complained in the wilderness of a lack of meat and that the manna was not good enough. In response ‘The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not” (Numbers 11:23). God gathered seventy elders together and took ‘some of the spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on the seventy elders’ (Numbers 11:1–30). Israel was later reminded of the same truth (Zechariah 8:6; Psalm 126; Jeremiah 31:17–28).

Paul also knew of God’s blessings in times of need (Philippians 4:11–19).

Mary, Jesus’ mother, was told that, though she was a virgin, her son would rule in the house of Jacob, and sit on David’s throne. Her son would be ‘Son of the Most High’ and would be born of the Holy Spirit. Not knowing how this would occur, but that ‘nothing will be impossible with God’, Mary responded by praising God in song (Luke 1:26ff).

We can also seek God and call upon him to have mercy on us and pardon us. We can anticipate his promises that we will go out in joy and be led back in peace, and that since God’s way and thoughts are higher than ours:

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 55:13).

Under authority

Luke 7:1–10

True authority

Jesus' assessment of the centurion's faith is worth considering:

When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (Luke 7:9).

One reason for Jesus' assessment may be his view of the centurion's faith in Jesus' ability to heal at a distance by speaking an authoritative word. Another perspective may be that Jesus recognised the centurion's humility in seeing himself as unworthy of receiving Jesus into his own home. A further reason for Jesus' statement might be that the centurion could see that Jesus acted under God's authority when healing.

The centurion certainly made the connection that as he was under Caesar's authority, so Jesus was under God's authority. The centurion recognised that none of us are ever *in* authority, as such, except the Father (see Acts 1:8). This view of authority contrasted with the opinions of the Jewish leaders who saw Jesus working under Beelzebub's authority (Matthew 12:22–28). They could not bring themselves to contemplate Jesus' explanation of himself: 'But if it is by the finger [Spirit] of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you' (Luke 11:20; cf. Matthew 12:28).

The centurion used Caesar's authority to serve, to love and to do good – as the elders reported to Jesus. We may see authority as something to be rejected in order that we can assert our autonomy and independence. The centurion saw authority as a channel for serving and doing good, for loving other people.

This view about authority contrasted with that expressed by the unjust judge when he was confronted by the persistent widow. Jesus affirmed her faith by questioning whether such faith will be found 'when the Son of Man comes' (Luke 18:8). Jesus asserted, however, that God is not an unjust judge:

And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them (Luke 18:7–8)?

The primary biblical focus of justice is not punishment, but the provision of needs to bring prosperity. True justice is about restoration and doing good.

Good gifts

When we come to God, how do we expect to be received? Are we, like the centurion willing to come under his authority, and trust him to do good and to bring justice? What does it mean to come under the authority of unjust judges

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and rulers, as the widow did in Jesus' story? Jesus' responses to the centurion's faith and the widow's persistence reinforce his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:11; cf. Luke 11:13)!²¹

The Gospels mention another centurion, who, after Jesus' death on the cross declared, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' (Matthew 27:54). He saw Jesus acting to help us where we were most in need, and where we are too often most reluctant to help. He saw Jesus as righteous, as acting rightly towards those who acted perversely. As one writer has put it, 'we are rebels taken with weapons in our hands'.²² The two centurions recognised something of who Jesus was, and that through his death and resurrection he would disarm evil spiritual powers and ungodly human authorities and melt stubborn hearts with his forgiving, reconciling love. His authority is true authority, and his gifts are the good gifts of the Holy Spirit. These gifts bring the true restoration and justice of his Father's reign of grace and mercy.

²¹ The contexts in Matthew and Luke both emphasise the need for discernment. Matthew's account warns of hypocrisy before speaking of the Father's gifts. It urges us to care for other people in the same way we want to be looked after, because 'the gate is narrow'. Jesus noted that false prophets are to be discerned by their fruits, and not everyone who calls him Lord will enter his Father's kingdom (Matthew 7:1–27). Luke records the Lord's Prayer and refers to a reluctant friend (Luke 11:1–13).

²² P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1993), 38.

God has come to help his people

Luke 7:11–17

Widows, orphans and strangers

The accounts of Elijah and the widow at Zarephath, of Jesus and the widow at Nain, and of Paul's conversion from persecutor to preacher are all familiar to church communities. The stories of the widows at Zarephath and Nain remind us that the Bible has much to say about the disadvantages and difficulties experienced by widows, orphans and strangers.

Luke's account of Jesus meeting a funeral procession near the entrance to Nain indicates that his encounter involved the convergence of two 'large' groups of people (Luke 7:11–12). We are not told why Jesus went to Nain, but we do know something of what happened on his arrival! The adult son of a widow was usually active in supporting and caring for his mother, and so his death was highly significant for her future life.

Jesus took the initiative and spoke compassionately to her before turning to the corpse and commanding the young man to rise (cf. Ezekiel 37:1ff). Luke recorded a third action of Jesus: when the 'dead man sat up and began to speak, ... Jesus gave him to his mother' (Luke 7:15). The two groups of people were awestruck and glorified God for his gracious provision, with the news spreading 'throughout Judea and all the surrounding country' (Luke 7:17).

The crowd's belief that a 'great prophet' was present referred to Elijah staying with the widow at Zarephath during the years of drought he had predicted and raising her son (1 Kings 17), and to Elisha caring for the Shunammite woman and her son (2 Kings 4:8–36). In saying a 'great prophet' had 'risen among us' the crowd knew that great prophets raise the dead and saw Jesus' presence with them in continuity with Elijah and Elisha.²³

Life and death: death and life

Do we hear these stories as nice, but unreal narratives? These accounts point to a deeper question: does life explain death, or does death explain life? Do we live life and worry about death later, somehow hoping and pretending it will go away? Is our religion a spiritual life assurance policy?

Jesus said the opposite, as those around him recognised: explain death and you will find life (Luke 9:23–26; cf. Matthew 16:24–26). The writer of Hebrews developed Jesus' themes about not being ashamed before the Father, and not tasting death before seeing God's kingdom (Hebrews 2:10ff).

²³ The crowd said that 'A great prophet has risen among us!' (Luke 7:16); cf. the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1–12:11 and Jesus' declaration in John 8:51 that 'whoever keeps my word will never see death'.

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The message Jesus gave the crowds at Capernaum and Nain was consistent with the one the angel declared to the women who went to Jesus' burial tomb: 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said' (Matthew 28:5–6).

It was this truth that was anticipated by Elijah praying for the lad at Zarephath. It was this truth that was hoped for when Elisha cared for the Shunammite woman and her son. It was this reality that Jesus declared to the widow at Nain when he told her young son to get up.

It was this good news Paul was given to preach 'through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead'. It was this gospel Paul received 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ' when God the Father 'who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me' (Galatians 1:1, 10–15).

It was this resurrection which so deeply informed Paul's gospel:

- Sharing his gospel – his good news – meant passing on what was most significant, namely that Jesus Christ's death was 'for our sins' and happened according to the Scriptures – as was his burial and resurrection three days later. Jesus' appearance to Paul followed Jesus revealing himself to Peter, the twelve disciples and then to more than five hundred people at once (1 Corinthians 15:1–8).
- Jesus' resurrection meant for Paul that there is a resurrection from the dead for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Paul described the alternative as being that his proclamation was pointless (1 Corinthians 15:12–23).
- This divine act of making everyone alive in Christ correlated for Paul with Messiah Jesus handing over God's kingdom to the Father, having defeated all God's enemies, the last of which is death (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).
- After a further discussion of these themes, Paul announced 'a mystery'. Change and imperishable resurrection defeat death and destroy its sting (1 Corinthians 15:51–55).

That is why, in reciting the Nicene creed, we declare that we 'look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come'.²⁴ The resurrection of Jesus deals with the *power* of sin and guilt, the *pollution* of evil, and the *penalty* of human rebellion. We await the time when a further aspect will be true, when Christ's resurrection has overcome the *presence* of evil, and when our current experience of all these provisions will be uncontested.

²⁴ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 139.

Jesus: the good Samaritan

Luke 10:25–37

Reconciling all things

God's plan involves the whole human race (Colossians 1:15ff).

There can be no resurrection unless there is a crucifixion. And there can be no Pentecost unless there is a grave. The gospel declares that death precedes renewed life, that a grain of wheat must be buried before it can bear fruit and produce a harvest. The gospel we believe proclaims futility to all our efforts to preserve life from death, as it is only through death that life fully comes.

Loving God means believing in restoration

Moses did not see this message as too remote, too hard, or beyond the nation's grasp. They did not need to ascend to heaven to understand it as the place to look for it was in their hearts (Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

Paul used this theme of human hearts when he told the Roman Christians that God's salvation comes to those who confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their hearts that God resurrected him. Belief, according to Paul, leads to justification for people of all nationalities since 'the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him' (Romans 10:9–12).

The story of the good and generous Samaritan is a story of a person who believed in the restoration of someone who had been attacked by robbers. He believed he lived in a universe where it made sense to care for those who suffer undeserved pain. Jesus made no mention in the parable about the Samaritan's views about or beliefs in God, or those of the one who was attacked!

We may be like that injured man by the side of the road. Jesus may come to us as a good Samaritan through the unexpected kindness of unfamiliar people acting in unexpected ways. The church – pictured in the parable as the priest and the Levite – may not always be where we find help.

Our restoration, renewal and healing require a Saviour giving himself on a cross and being raised from the dead. If we are living in the reality that it is God raising the dead, then not only will we know that God provides for us, but that God will reach out to others through us, offering restoration, renewal and healing to them as well. God's plan for reconciliation is his eternal pleasure, just as Paul wrote to the Colossian church: 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things' (Colossians 1:20).

Knowing true freedom

Luke 13:10–17

Freedom and dignity

This woman had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. Jesus' word to her was direct and effective: 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment' (Luke 13:12). The Pharisees were angry: it was the sabbath day and she was a woman!

Jesus' response was firstly to identify her as a 'daughter of Abraham' (Luke 13:16). Paul wrote that 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' and that Abraham is the 'father of many nations, not only by law, but by faith' (Romans 4:3, 17).

Jesus' discussion in John 8 about whose children we are, and to whom and to what we are in bondage, provides a helpful perspective on this story. The Pharisees and the woman could only know the freedom that Jesus gives by knowing the truth he spoke: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free' (John 8:31, 32). Freedom meant permanent release from slavery to sin into true discipleship and family life.

Satan had kept her in bondage for 18 years. He no doubt did this through our fear of death; a fear that has to do with judgement (cf. Hebrews 2:14, 15; 1 John 4:18). This fear was based on false perceptions since Jesus had tasted death for us all. He was now the King of life who has authority over death (2 Timothy 1:10; Revelation 1:18) and who brings God's family to glory through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). This is of great benefit to Abraham's descendants because they live by faith – by a faith that accepts the atonement made by Christ as high priest (Hebrews 2:16–18). If 'Death has been swallowed up in victory', then the sting of sickness is also removed (1 Corinthians 15:54–56).

Praise and delight

The second aspect of Jesus' response related to him setting her 'free from this bondage on the sabbath day' (Luke 13:16). In response to his declaration, she 'immediately stood up straight and began praising God' and the entire crowd rejoiced at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing (Luke 13:13). She was justified – straightened up – in body as well as spirit and soul and mind!

Christ has redeemed us. He has freed us by 'becoming a curse for us' so that, in him, Abraham's blessing might reach all nations and that everyone 'might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Galatians 3:14). This redemptive liberation is for people of all nationalities, all religious backgrounds and all social groups regardless of economic status or gender 'for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'. And those who belong to Christ, Paul insisted, inherit all the promises given to Abraham (Galatians 3:28, 29). Abraham's blessings come to us; we receive the

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Spirit by faith and are released from slavery into true life in God's family – and the inheritance God has promised (Galatians 4:6, 7).

Healing her on a sabbath day spoke of the rest God had promised to his people. The sabbath is God's gift of a time for freedom from sin's hardness, rebellion and disobedience; from the 'restless sea' of wickedness (Isaiah 57:15–21). It is freedom from the 'deceitfulness of sin' (Hebrews 3:7–4:16).

Jesus' message is heard by faith, and expressed in true obedience, service, worship, love and freedom. When we are released from bondage, when we recognise who truly frees us and the way in which he liberates us, and when we realise that our freedom is receiving his true love, then we too will 'stand up straight' in our spirits, even if our bodies are weakened (Luke 13:11).

The prodigal Father

Luke 15:11–32

The Father's first act of love

This parable is usually named after the prodigal son, but also highlights the response of his older brother. It is worth asking whether the son's father was also prodigal, and so whether the father could be called prodigal. The word prodigal is not directly used by Luke but provides a commentary on Jesus' parable.²⁵ If prodigious is wantonly generous, then perhaps this description fits Jesus' reference to our heavenly Father's benevolence in his Sermon on the Mount. God's making the sun rise and sending rain regardless of anyone's ethics and morality is, according to Jesus, a reason for loving one's enemies and praying for one's persecutors (Matthew 5:43–45).

The younger son's request 'to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me"' was equivalent to wishing his father was dead! Did the father already know what was in both of his sons' hearts when he gave his younger son his share? Was he tacitly accepting the prodigal son's death wish? Was Jesus outlining aspects of the nature and action of his Father, Father-God, Father-Creator? Is this parable providing something of a re-run of what happened in Eden? Is this God, in his great love, treating us with integrity and dignity, even when our hearts' desires are not aligned with his will (cf. Romans 1:16ff)?

Jesus' narrative was a reminder of the consequences of the failure of Adam and Eve and their descendants:

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need (Luke 15:13–14).

The younger son's realisation that the life of his father's servants was preferable to his existence in a far country raises the question as to whether the son would have come 'to himself' if his father had refused to give him his share of his inheritance. If this correlates with our story, then we can thank God for his discernment! Just as the father in Jesus' story spoke to his son through his son's memory of home; we may come to our senses as God reminds us of our true home.

The Father's second act of love

The son's father was looking for and expecting his son: 'But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20). The wayward son faced his father and

²⁵ The younger son 'squandered his property in dissolute living' (Luke 15:13).

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admitted what he had done. His father had already paid the price for his son's return – it was his assets that were 'squandered' in the 'distant country' (Luke 15:13)! Yet the father waited for no confession, for no penance, for no apology, for no anguish and for no sorrow. He only wanted his son and wanted him *as his son alive to himself as his son's father*.

Was Jesus was speaking about God's love: 'The father's run is that terrible sprint from heaven to the wood'?²⁶ Jesus did not mention the father speaking words to his son. His message was sacramental. He hugged and kissed his son. His response to his son's confession was to order his slaves to dress his son for a celebration and to prepare the relevant festivities 'for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (Luke 15:20–22)!

The Father's third act of love

The elder brother's anger suggests his verdict was unlike his younger brother's response in at least two ways. His address to his father did not refer to his father as his father, but demanded his father listen to him. In contrast to his father's response to his brother, his father spoke to and pleaded with him.

The elder brother's anger made no difference to his father's generosity to either of his sons:

Then the father said to [his older son], 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found' (Luke 15:31–32).

What could be stronger and more reassuring than his father's words that 'all that is mine is yours'?

The main message in this story is not a moral application that we readily act both as the elder brother and as the wasteful son. The main theme is God our heavenly Father's generosity and goodness in saying 'Come home' to rebels and urging pious people to 'Enjoy the feast'.

²⁶ F. Dale Bruner, 'A Tale of Two Sons,' *Christianity Today* (1985): 42ff.

Jesus returns

Luke 21:25–36

Redemption is drawing near

Jesus spoke of distress, confusion and fear, but encouraged those who were listening to him to look out for the Son of Man and to ‘stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near’ (Luke 21:28). He added that they were to be ‘alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man’ (Luke 21:36).

Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonian church was that the Lord ‘so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints’ (1 Thessalonians 3:13).

What does it mean to ‘escape all these things that will take place’, to ‘stand before the Son of Man’, and to be holy and blameless in God’s presence? The primary issue is not whether our own personal death or the return of Jesus Christ will occur first. He will return, and we will die! We must face these realities. Our view of death dictates our view of life. A reflection on how we live indicates our deeper anxieties and fears, and our hopes and expectations. Jesus highlighted the contrast between apprehension, heaviness and anxiety, and confidence in God’s acceptance of us. Being acceptable to God, being holy and blameless before him is fundamental to the way we are to live.

Redemption is acceptance

Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians of our Father God abundantly blessing us in Christ, having already chosen us in Christ prior to creating the universe – all so that we would live ‘holy and blameless before him in love’ as his adopted family. This adoption relates to God’s goodness and delight and is ‘to the praise of [God’s] glorious grace that [God] freely bestowed on us in the Beloved’. God’s lavish grace means we are redeemed and forgiven through Jesus’ blood and are God’s recreated humanity (Ephesians 1:4–8).

In the sufferings and tragedies of life, in the crises and judgements that come, do we cower in fear before on-coming death, or do we respond because of God’s redemption? Are we swayed by the fracturing around us caused by human depravity and deprivation, or are we confident that no matter how cruel and severe these issues are, that God is redeemer from before creation existed? Are we convinced that God would not create unless he was adequate as creator, sovereign and Father for all the issues that his creatures, servants and family would endure?

Our response to questions about the innate goodness of God and concerning whether there can even be a God with all this suffering leads us to ask what God does about suffering? Is God indifferent to our situations? Does God repair

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everything behind our backs without regard for our integrity? Or does God redeem us from among us by being with us? This is the meaning of Advent in the church's calendar. Both the first and the second advents are only comprehensible because of Jesus' death on the cross.

We are to understand our lives and our world in the context of God's prolific and freely given grace which he has lavishly shared with us in Jesus Christ, his beloved Son. It is this grace that brings 'redemption through [Jesus'] blood', and which results in the forgiveness of our failings (Ephesians 1:7). Here is the key. God works to bring everything to fullness by forgiving us in Christ. It is on this basis that we can be alert to the reality of who God is and what God does. This is the foundation for our hope that we will be holy and blameless before Him. Everything comes from Father-God – before time, in time and beyond time. Everything is focused on Christ's cross; in Jesus' free, lavish gift of himself according to God's eternal will. All these treasures are rejected by us when we attempt to self-justify or prove ourselves by ourselves.

Jesus was indicating that it's better to go to the judgement with him as redeemer and saviour than to go on our own. He redeemed us and made us holy and blameless. We can now boldly approach the throne of God and thank him for making our bitterness, anxiety and apprehension sweet, and for taking every initiative in preparing us for his gift of life in and beyond this world.

Sifted as wheat

Luke 22:28–37

Jesus' suffering

Jesus was with his disciples in an upper room. He knew his death was hours away. If Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 50:4–9 also concerned Christ, then Jesus had set his face like flint and knew that he would not be put to shame. He had expressed his imminent suffering by breaking bread and taking a cup. Having his body broken and his blood poured out anticipated a harvest ahead.

Jesus had spoken of the torment his betrayer would experience, so indicating that faithfulness to their Master was most appropriate. The disciples had been more interested in discussing their own concepts of grandeur and had been told that true greatness involves being servants rather than masters. It was after this that Jesus turned to Simon Peter and ever so gently told him that they were to be sifted 'like wheat' (Luke 22:31). Jesus spoke personally to Peter in calling him 'Simon, Simon' in verse 31 and then 'Peter' immediately after Peter had replied to Jesus.

Jesus' prayer

Peter would have known prophecies concerning chaff and sifting referred to judgement. He would have heard Jesus' parables about sowing and harvesting and the explanations Jesus had given about them. But Jesus had not spoken elsewhere of people being sifted by Satan with God's implied consent.

Another reference to a discussion between an Accuser and God is in the beginning of the story of Job. In that story, the Accuser operated within God's sovereignty, God mentioned Job's integrity, and God specified the nature and limits of Job's suffering. At the end of the book, without further reference to any Accuser, Job came to a new awareness of God as creator and redeemer.

Just as Job understood that the essence of life involved faith in God, even in suffering, so Peter needed to know that whatever he thought he could achieve, God's actions focused on faith, and not on ambition or motivation. Jesus' words to Peter that 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' may also apply retrospectively to Job (Luke 22:32). Jesus' prayer gave reality to their faith. Not only does Jesus' prayer apply to Peter and Job, it applies to all of God's family throughout all of history (cf. John 17:9, 11b, 15–24).

Simon Peter had much to gain from being sifted and suffering the exposure of his failure. The second half of Jesus' statement emphasised Jesus' certainty that his prayer for Peter would be answered: 'when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers', not 'if ...' (Luke 22:32).

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Paul, along with the other New Testament writers, taught this as a fundamental life-principle: God's power is known in weakness, living is understood in dying, and God's grace is clearest when facing our failures (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:43; 2 Corinthians 12:9, 13:4; Galatians 2:19, 20).

This is the truth revealed by the cross of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18–31). God, in the mystery of his grace, dealt with all the deceitful intensity and angry rebellion of sin at the cross. God does not arbitrarily forgive. He came to the cross in the humanity of Jesus as the fullness of our humanity, and in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19). He was lifted up 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness'. He was 'wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities' (John 3:14; Isaiah 53:5; cf. John 12:24; Galatians 3:13).

Peter's faith, like Job's, and like ours, drew on the wonderful reality that God, in his great love, has washed and purified us from our sin. As Paul put it: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). As 'the righteousness of God', we need not fear being sifted, however painful the ordeal. More than that, here is a basis for understanding life and showing compassion. Here is the way to strengthen the family of God and to reach out to all people as far as we are able (Romans 12:1–21; Galatians 6:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Timothy 6:18, 19; Titus 3:1; Hebrews 13:16, 1 Peter 3:9–11; 4:19).

I know Jesus, but who are you?

Acts 19:1–20

The name of the Lord Jesus

The reading from Acts 19 indicates something of the level of Paul's concern for the church in Ephesus. He believed that there could be no true community, no true baptism and no true discipleship that was not 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' and which did not include receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:5).

The seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish High Priest, tried imitating the work God was doing in Paul's ministry and miracles, only to find themselves overcome by demons. They tried to command evil spirits to depart from someone 'by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims' (Acts 19:13). The evil spirits replied that they knew of Jesus and Paul but did not know these seven sons. The name of the Lord Jesus was praised, and the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed as people came to see that the Holy Spirit was upon Paul and those who believed in Jesus as Lord. The powers of darkness knew that God was not disarmed by their rebellion, and that they were subject to his authority!

The reign of God

Paul boldly proclaimed the kingdom of God for three months, emphasising that Jesus was not a solo preacher-healer. Paul thought of Jesus as a man under God's authority. The contrast between Jesus and Paul, and those who tried to emulate their ministries without knowing Jesus, stirs reminders of other insights provided by Luke and John, and of Paul's teaching in his letters.

As Luke wrote these verses, he might have had in mind his account of the centurion who sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal his slave (Luke 7:1–10). Luke emphasised Jesus' authority in his description of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (Luke 3:21–22, 9:35). Later, after teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus explained that 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:13).

Luke then recorded Jesus exorcising a mute demon and commenting that divided empires become barren ruins and deserts. By contrast, Jesus declared, the reign of God comes to those who are delivered from demons 'by the finger of God'. This divine reign reaches people who hear and obey God's word:

While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (Luke 11:14–28)!

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This understanding of authority is consistent with Peter's message on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33–36; cf. Matthew 28:19–20).

These thoughts are not unique to Luke's writings. John's Gospel records Jesus speaking of his authority as his Father's son, of Jesus sending the Holy Spirit, and of the 'greater works' that 'the one who believes in me will also do ... because I am going to the Father' (John 5:19–30, 10:25–30; 14:11–12, 25–30, 15:26, 16:15). The Father, for Jesus, is the final authority (Acts 1:4–8; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24 where Christ hands the kingdom to God the Father and Philippians 2:11 Jesus' lordship is 'to the glory of God the Father').

We are to know Jesus and to live under his lordship (cf. Acts 19:15). To be who we are created to be is to live in his kingdom, and to live in his kingdom is to live under his authority. This is a life of true obedience, a life of true service and worship which is a life lived knowing God!

Paul's Letters

More than conquerors

Romans 8:28–30

In all things, God ...

Paul wrote to the Roman church that ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28). Why could anyone be so confident about everything working together, let alone working together for anyone’s benefit? Another translation of this passage says that ‘we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28 NIV). Putting these translations together suggests that we can rest in God’s actions as creator, sustainer, redeemer and consummator both from seeing by faith a little of the various ways that things interact as well as from understanding something of the way in which God works.

Those whom God ‘foreknew’, according to Paul, love him and are called according to his purpose. In what ways are we to know we are foreknown by God? The answer is not primarily philosophical but pastoral: the best response is to love God with all our being and our neighbours as ourselves!

... conforms us to the likeness of his Son

Paul wrote that God not only pre-sets our destination, but that this destination is that we are ‘to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’ (Romans 8:29; cf. Revelation 7:9ff). The apostle is saying that we will have Christ’s moral and spiritual contours, his ethical and relational characteristics! Paul developed this theme further in urging the Roman Christians to have their ‘eyes wide open to the mercies of God’ and to give God

your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-make you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed. Thus you will prove in practice that the will of God is good, acceptable to him and perfect (Romans 12:1–2).²⁷

Elsewhere Paul wrote that

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:49).

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one

²⁷ *New Testament in Modern English, The*, trans. J. B. Phillips (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

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degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

[you] have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Colossians 3:10).

He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Philippians 3:21).

Peter thought along these lines when wanting his readers to be ‘Like obedient children, … not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance’ (1 Peter 1:14), while John’s first letter asks those who received it to notice the Father’s love for them in calling them his family. Even though the world does not recognise them or God, they could be confident that when they see God as God is that they will be like him:

And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

One aspect of the way we arrive at God’s predetermined destination is his calling of us through Jesus Christ. Just as God spoke creation into existence by his word, so his calling of us is that we would have the ‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6; cf. Genesis 1:1ff; Psalm 33:1ff, 100:1ff, 104:29). His calling of us in redeeming and restoring us is as effective as his creative and sustaining word.

Another aspect is God’s justifying of us in Christ. His calling would be defective unless our injustices receive God’s righteous and restorative judgement. God achieves this outcome at the cross (1 Peter 3:18; Romans 4:5 and 5:6–8; cf. Abraham in Galatians 3:6–14; Revelation 15:3–4).

A third aspect is that God glorifies us with Christ. Not only does God call and justify us, he ensures that we will share his glory with everyone in his family (Romans 8:17–18; Titus 2:11–14; 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6; Hebrews 2:10)!

Jesus is Lord

Romans 10:5–13

Raised from the dead!

What does the lordship of Jesus mean today? Is it a concept, an idea, or a truth about a person? To be raised from the dead is personal and indicates Jesus' sovereignty over death, and so over what causes death and gives it its power (Romans 10:9).

Jesus' temptations describe something of his battle with the power that death can hold over us (Luke 4:1–13). In the first temptation he was lord over hunger. The second temptation showed him to be lord over pride and the fleshly desires we may be enticed into (cf. 1 John 2:15–17). His third temptation was about glory and power, identity and calling, and wisdom (cf. Genesis 3:6–9).

Jesus' first recorded sermon was in many ways a response to his temptations (Luke 4:14–19). He proclaimed seasons of God's grace and mercy by bringing good news to the poor, by healing the broken-hearted, by freeing prisoners, and by giving sight to blind people.

In tempting him, Satan posed Jesus with a choice as to the means and path by which Jesus was to be the bread of life (cf. John 6:26–35), to receive the kingdoms of this world from his Father (cf. Psalm 2; John 18:36), and to be declared Son of God and Son of Man (cf. Romans 1:1–6; Matthew 16:13ff).

Suffering and service or sensuality and seduction?

The primary issue Jesus faced is one that confronts us: Would he walk the path of suffering and service, or the path of sensuality and seduction? Our choice is between the way of Christ's cross or the routes of Satanic seduction (cf. Matthew 7:12–27). This choice is not primarily academic or political but personal, as Paul indicated to the Philippian Christians (Philippians 3:7–11).

Paul recognised the extent of the crisis we face by referring to Deuteronomy 30:11ff. His message is that we are not alone, and that Jesus is here, now! We do not have to bring Christ down from heaven or lift him up from the grave (Romans 10:8–11; cf. Deuteronomy 30:11–14).

The word that is near is the message that Jesus is Lord, that he has risen as he said, having tasted death for everyone to destroy the prince of death and 'free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death' (Hebrews 2:14–18). His presence with God's family is clearly testified to by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 2:10–13).

God found Adam and Eve naked and ashamed. In Christ we are clothed with glory and freed from shame. We can beware of the empty futility of Satan's devices and trust God and not be ashamed.

The judgements of God

1 Corinthians 10:1–13; Luke 13:1–9

To say that this is an unpopular subject is quite an understatement. While we look for justice in various ways, there seems a parallel demand that God never calls us or anyone to account. When considering appropriate emphases on encouragement, counselling and rehabilitation, it is also worth reflecting on the declarations in the Apostles' and Nicene creeds that Jesus

descended into hell. ... He ascended into heaven, ... from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.²⁸

Gospel

When Jesus heard of violent persecutions and natural disasters, his response indicates that we should not expect God's judgement to be based simply on earthly prosperity or longevity. A more thorough divine judgement with more final consequences awaits us and calls for our repentance (Luke 13:1–5).

The parable Jesus added points out that in this life God displays considerable forbearance. According to Jesus, God is not hasty nor harsh, and is not active beyond that which, when all factors are considered, is fair and reasonable (Luke 13:6–9).

Jesus' message was threefold: rather than judge other people, especially based on their circumstances, we are to recognise the reasonableness and fact of divine judgement and align our thinking and actions with what Jesus shared when proclaiming the reign of God.

Epistle

In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul recalled the experiences of Israel in the wilderness. He noted that although God richly provided for them, 'God was not pleased with most of them' (1 Corinthians 10:5). Paul noted that what happened to them because of their actions serves 'as an example, and [was] written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10:11). In these verses, Paul first identified divine dissatisfaction and then repeated his assessment in stronger tones.

Paul's statement that

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it

²⁸ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 26, 139.

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is naturally taken as an encouragement, as it is (1 Corinthians 10:13). Paul's message was not primarily encouragement but warning: we are not to expect to escape judgement because of circumstances, environment, parents or biology. In setting boundaries around testing, Paul first warned and then exhorted that

if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ... Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols (1 Corinthians 10:12–14).

His message was direct and strong: If we think we are standing firm, then we had better be careful that we do not fall, especially given the story of the Israelites on their way to the promised land: we are, after all, those 'on whom the ends of the ages has come' (1 Corinthians 10:11)!

This implies that we are in the final era of history and that God's purposes are reaching their goal. Much of God's agenda is on public display and published.

Old Testament

God's holiness is not harsh and judgemental. God's holiness rescued Israel from Egypt and centuries later, returned his people from exile. It is this holiness which did not consume the burning bush Moses encountered. It is this holiness which sets God apart in his person and action (cf. Exodus 20:1ff). It is this holiness of which James wrote:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change (James 1:17, cf. 'who does not change like shifting shadows' (NIV), 'with him there is no variation, no play of passing shadows' (NEB)).²⁹

James was, in a way, paraphrasing God's message to Moses at the burning bush: 'God said to Moses "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"'" (Exodus 3:14). Pharaoh, by implication, lacked authenticity; he was not who he said he was. It is this divine holiness that we should not presume upon, as Moses realised when told to remove his sandals. It is this holiness that confronts us when we are not true to ourselves, to others, and to God.

God is holy, his holiness saves, renews and restores us. Its saving, renewing and restorative action becomes our most sorry judgement should we trivialise it and treat it lightly (cf. Psalm 95).

²⁹ *New English Bible, The*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Penguin Books, Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1964).

Even God would have cried

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:5

Seen and unseen; temporary and eternal

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:17, 18).

There is no shortage of suffering in the world. Suffering hardly seems to fit the description of being a ‘slight momentary affliction’ or ‘light and momentary troubles’ (2 Corinthians 4:17 NRSV and NIV)! Yet Paul wrote that our difficulties are insignificant when contrasted to the unseen eternal glory that God has prepared for us (2 Corinthians 5:1, 5). Paul did not merely want us to put on a brave face and ignore sufferings. He said twice that they cause us to waste away and to groan (2 Corinthians 5:1–4).

Paul indicated that creation aches and groans with pains like those felt in childbirth (Romans 8:18–23) and shared his own experiences of being shipwrecked, flogged, beaten and malnourished (e.g. 2 Corinthians 11:22–33).

We may find it helpful to consider a statement by someone who experienced devastation from a natural disaster. They said that even God would have been crying.³⁰ How does God feel about our suffering? Was this person saying something valuable in assigning human emotion to God?

God’s goodness and compassion

God is good and pure and did not create evil or suffering. God’s first response is to choose to sustain his creation, even when it is saturated with rebellion and catastrophe. If we accept the testimony of the ancient Hebrew story of Job, and the whole Hebrew Bible, God always brings good to humanity, to all creatures, and to his world by being actively present to do good in all disasters.

Moses dramatically told the Israelites that God takes responsibility for his own actions: ‘See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand’ (Deuteronomy 32:39). This verse uses the language of the Exodus story and affirms the Eden narrative in declaring the demise of those who oppose God’s ‘compassion on his servants’ (Deuteronomy 32:36). Unless read with a bland literalism, this verse does not make God the author of evil, or state God sends disasters and murders people. Evil brings its own destruction and inexplicable tragedies occur (cf. Genesis 2:17, 4:6, 7; cf. Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1ff).

³⁰ The words were of someone who experienced the devastation on the Bay of Bengal islands caused by a 1985 cyclone. I do not have a reference for this quote.

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The writer of the book of Lamentations encourages us that God is still unfailingly compassionate even when all evidence is to the contrary. Surveying the destruction of his nation at the hands of the Babylonian invaders, he wrote:

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not (Lamentations 3:21, 22 KJV).

For that author, although good and evil are the results of what 'the Most High' says, our best response is to raise our hearts and hands 'to God in heaven', which is what the prophet himself does (Lamentations 3:21–41).

A psalmist sang of the LORD's compassion for people who are in awe of God, and that this compassion derives from God's awareness that we are formed from dust. While humanity is fragile like grasses and flowers,

the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments (Psalm 103:13–18).

The psalmist set God's compassion and knowledge in the context of the LORD working 'vindication and justice for all who are oppressed' and was confident of the LORD's father-like care in not being accusative or angry when dealing with our failures and short-comings (Psalm 103:6ff).

God is the great relief worker

We can trust God to be sovereign and compassionate, and that however stirred and concerned we are about one situation, God is even more active and kind. God is not only sympathetic to our sufferings but is the great relief worker. He is restoring the creation to its true function and magnificence. Our best efforts are expressions of God's motherly care (Isaiah 66:12–13).

In Paul's words, 'our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all' and that, 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him' (2 Corinthians 4:17; Romans 8:28 NIV).

All these truths are evident in the life and death of Jesus. The basis for us having sure hope is in him. It was Jesus who wept at Lazarus' tomb, and who saw the crowds as sheep without a shepherd (John 11:35; Matthew 9:36). It was Jesus who wept over Jerusalem saying, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace'. It was Jesus who said to the women who followed him to his trial, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children' (Luke 19:43, 23:28).

The writer of the book of Hebrews wrote of Jesus offering up

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prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:7, 8).

Isaiah 53 describes a man of sorrows, who was familiar with suffering, despised and rejected, oppressed and afflicted, and taken away to die with the wicked. The prophet's verdict about God's servant was that he will 'see the light of life and be satisfied' when his suffering was ended, and 'will justify many' and 'bear their iniquities' as God's 'righteous servant' (Isaiah 53:11 NIV).

The narrative in Lamentations that our best response to tragedy is to 'lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven' is reinforced by this vision of a servant who suffers with those who suffer, and who brings light and life to those dominated by darkness, despair and death (Lamentations 3:41).

We see God as sovereign and compassionate in Jesus' death and resurrection. The mystery of suffering can only be comprehended through Jesus' death on the cross. It is there that he knew the deepest human suffering; that redemptive and restorative suffering which enables us to be confident of the eternal glory that God has generously promised. It is because Jesus was crowned with glory and honour at his baptism and transfiguration that he tasted death for everyone, and it was because he suffered death that he is now crowned with the glory and honour (Hebrews 2:9).

No wonder the writer of Hebrews exhorted people not to become weary or discouraged, but to put aside the things that weigh us down and the 'sin that clings so closely', and to reflect on the hostilities Jesus endured from evildoers. It was while enduring this great suffering that Jesus dismissed the shame of being crucified and focused on the joy ahead of him of being seated 'at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12:1–3).

What can we say then about suffering? Yes, there is truth in the words uttered concerning the cyclone in Bangladesh. Yes, even God would have cried. The sufferings of God's people and the death of Jesus are sure evidence of that. We do well not to stop there. If, as we read in the Scriptures, it is true that Jesus, the author of our salvation, was made perfect through suffering, then will not we be made perfect the same way?³¹ And does not the creation ache and groan until this is accomplished? Is it not as Paul reminds us: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory' and mortality 'puts on immortality' (1 Corinthians 15:54)?

³¹ There is no suggestion that being made perfect or complete through suffering explains suffering or gives it purpose. One biblical message is that there is comfort in knowing that we are not abandoned by God when suffering, however we feel or think in times of trouble and trauma.

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The Holy Spirit is God's gift to us as the guarantee of what is to come, and that it is God himself who creates us and who re-creates us to share in his rescue and recovery of this broken world:

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

... He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee (2 Corinthians 5:1, 5).

Who died on the cross?

Galatians 2:19, 20

He died

What do the New Testament authors mean when they write that Jesus died on the cross? First and foremost, they want us to know that he died as a human person and not as a god wearing a human mask. John's Gospel begins by saying that Jesus was the Word made flesh (John 1:1–18). Paul wrote that Christ Jesus emptied himself of his divine prerogatives and became human (Philippians 2:5ff), and that when God sent his Son

in the likeness of sinful flesh ... to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3).

The writer of Hebrews, along with John and Paul, believed that Jesus shared our humanity, having been made like us in every way (Hebrews 2:14–18), while Peter referred to Jesus as a 'living stone' and as 'an example, so that you should follow in his steps' (1 Peter 1:21–25).

Yet, for these writers, his humanity was never outside of his deity. Rather, his humanity explained, revealed, exposed and declared his divinity. God not only revealed himself in Jesus Christ, he revealed true humanity as well.

In what ways are we to understand Jesus' death? Was humanity doing its best for God? Was it a supreme human effort and a majestic accomplishment? Was it the ultimate humanitarian action? While it may be considered in these terms, it is more than the sum of all of them as it involved *God* doing *God's* best in Jesus' humanity for all humanity and for all creation.

Is Jesus' death only the death of a martyr for whom we can have great sympathy and in whom we see a great example? No, he stirs more than our pity. He fulfils our longings – and those of the psalmist:

O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins (Psalm 130:7, 8 NIV).

Jesus can help us in our time of need. He became the source of eternal salvation. He provided purification for our sins and cleansing for our seared consciences. He put away sin (Hebrews 2:18, 5:9, 9:14, 26).

Yes, God is active in the death of Jesus. John's first letter tells us that God loved us so much that he sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:1, 2, 4:10). Paul wrote that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' and that 'God put [him] forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith' (2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 3:25).

We died

What then are we to make of New Testament references to Isaiah 52:13–53:12? What are we to make of Jesus' quote from Zechariah that God would smite the shepherd and scatter the sheep (Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27)? Or of Jesus' words from Psalm 22, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)?

Paul wrote about being crucified with Christ, about Jesus loving and dying for everyone, and that we have died with him:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live ... (Galatians 2:19, 20).

... all have died (2 Corinthians 5:14).

... for you have died (Colossians 3:3).

... we have been buried with him by baptism into death (Romans 6:3–8).

... we have died with him (2 Timothy 2:11–13).

The letter to the Hebrews reinforces these themes (Hebrews 2:8–15).

Death died

Our question was who died on the cross? We noted that Jesus died on the cross and that the New Testament writers saw this in terms of an atoning sacrifice by which he 'tasted death for everyone' (Hebrews 2:9). This also meant that death died at the cross. Peter told the crowd on the day of Pentecost that 'God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power' (Acts 2:24ff). Peter then quoted David (Acts 2:31; cf. Psalm 16:8–11).

We can conclude that when he died, we died, and death died (1 Corinthians 15:51–55). This is not because of anything that we have done, but because of God's power in saving and calling us is not based on our achievements but is 'according to his own purpose and grace'. This grace, we are told, 'was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began' and is now displayed in 'the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Timothy 1:8–10).

Now we can fill out/complete St Paul's sentences:

... it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19, 20).

... so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. ... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a

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new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new (2 Corinthians 5:14, 17)!

... your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Colossians 3:1–4).

... so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–8).

... we will also live with him; ... we will also reign with him (2 Timothy 2:11–13).

These thoughts were not Paul's or anyone else's concoctions: their message is consistent with that recorded of Jesus himself:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life (John 5:24).

Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death (John 8:51).

The hope of glory

Colossians 1:24–28

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?

There is active hospitality and warmth of welcome in the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three visitors (Genesis 18:2–8). Because of Abraham's and Sarah's ages, the travellers' declaration that Sarah would give birth to a son was met with surprise. But these visitors were not merely three men; they were a visitation of the LORD (Genesis 18:12–15). After Isaac was born to Sarah and Abraham, Sarah expressed her delight and joy and her expectation that those with her would rejoice in her being a mother at last. Indeed, Abraham shared her joy and 'made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned' (Genesis 21:6–8).

Only one thing was needed

The home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus was a familiar place to Jesus (Luke 10:38–42; cf. John 11:5). While Mary listened to Jesus, Martha was 'worried and distracted' in being hospitable (Luke 10:40). Hospitality was important in both this story and in the account of the visitors to Abraham and Sarah (cf. Genesis 18:1ff). But Martha's concerns for equity and justice when providing hospitality, however legitimate, were not seen by Jesus as the dominant issue. Listening was a critical aspect of the hospitality provided. Undistracted time relating to the visitors was more significant than being in the same location and more important than being preoccupied with one's own agendas!

When Jesus arrived at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus after Lazarus' death it was Mary who came to meet him and, while overwhelmed with what had occurred and the lateness of Jesus' arrival, Mary remained hopeful (John 11:20). Her belief in Jesus as Messiah at that time of intense crisis shows the depths which Jesus' words had reached (John 11:1ff).

Christ in you, the hope of glory

We may be distracted by many appropriate concerns and distorted priorities. We may even be like the seed that fell among the thorns in the parable of the sower where 'the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing' (Mark 4:19).

We are called to be good soil and 'hear the word and accept it and bear fruit' (Mark 4:19). These are those 'who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance' (Luke 8:15). They hear 'the word of God' and so know the 'knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God' which other people do not understand (Luke 8:10, 11).

This brings us to Paul's message to the Colossian church in Colossians 1:25–28). From the book of Genesis onwards, it is the word of God which brings 'the hope

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of glory'. It is this message which is disclosed to God's household by God's hospitality in Jesus Christ so that we may be matured in him for a new and renewed home: for a new creation. As both the narratives regarding Abraham and Sarah, and Martha, Mary and Lazarus indicate, the revelation of the word of God is not mere propositions, it is magnificently and majestically personal – filled with glory and hope. It is the living Christ in us bringing 'grace ... and peace from God our Father' who creates abundant 'love in the Spirit' (Colossians 1:1, 8, 27).

We can cast all our anxieties on him because he cares for us, just as he did for Abraham and Sarah, and for Mary, Martha and Lazarus (cf. 1 Peter 5:7).

The word of God

2 Timothy 3:14–17

Testimony

The Bible describes itself as testimony and its authors as witnesses to God's action in history.

The Old Testament

Psalm 119 speaks of God's word as wonderful, enlightening and informative (Psalm 119:18, 105, 129–130).

The Old Testament includes about 800 references to 'says the LORD' and of these 'Thus says the LORD' occurs over 400 times.

The New Testament witnesses to the Old Testament in many places including in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17–19; cf. Luke 24:44ff). Jesus came to fulfil something he saw anticipated the fulfilment of God's intentions and the revelation of who God is! When Jesus said his Father's 'word is truth', he was referring to more than what is written in the Hebrew Scriptures, or to what God said to him; he himself *is* the word of God (cf. John 1:1, 17:17). The New Testament Scriptures come to us within this understanding of Jesus.

Peter emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit and God's saving purposes in 'the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory' (1 Peter 1:10–12). He later wrote that he and those with him 'did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty' (2 Peter 1:16–21).

Paul stressed to Timothy that no one should despise Timothy's youth and that Timothy should focus on teaching and exhorting people by publicly reading and expounding the Scriptures. This would be consistent with what Timothy had learnt from a child (2 Timothy 3:14–17).

The New Testament

Luke indicated his purpose in writing his two books (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1, 2). John's Gospel was written 'that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31, cf. 21:24). John's letters were written 'to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13, cf. 2:14, 1:5).

The Book of Revelation describes its author as being in the Spirit on the Lord's day and hearing a loud trumpet-like voice behind him telling him to document what he was about to see and to 'send it to the seven churches'. John was told to write down what he heard, 'for these words are trustworthy and true' (Revelation 1:10, 11, 21:5).

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Peter explained his purpose in writing to his readers (2 Peter 3:1, 2) and Paul spoke of his apostolic authority in 1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Corinthians 13:3, 10 and Galatians 1:11–24. Peter testified concerning Paul’s writings and ‘other Scriptures’ (2 Peter 3:15–18; cf. 2 Corinthians 10:10).

Affirmation

The Bible is affirmed by the church throughout history. Early church controversies were debated in the context of the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and the apostolic writings. This led to the New Testament being separated from other documents because of its common witness to the person and work of Christ, especially his death and resurrection.

The Reformation renewed concern for this proclamation. Acceptance of the authenticity of the Scriptures in matters of faith and doctrine was understood as an indicator of renewal, while its rejection was expected to create discord.

Relevance

The Bible is relevant to personal experience. It has been said that ‘It’s not the parts that I do not understand that cause me problems, it is the parts that I do understand’³² The problem areas of the Bible may be problems because of what we unnecessarily read into Scripture or because of what we do not want to hear from it. Historical context is always important and helpful.

A true reading of Scripture includes focusing on how its original readers understood it and on what we can learn from it in our own personal and community situations. Although not all of us are teachers, it is imperative that the church is clear concerning the authority of the Scriptures in our lives. The testimony of the Scriptures is not only evident in the action it describes but has its authority because of the God whose action it records:

God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Revelation 2:7, etc.).

³² Source unknown.

With hands lifted up
2 Timothy 3:14–4:2

Wisdom through faith for every good work

Paul's message to Timothy was that the Scriptures 'are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 3:15 NIV) because all 'scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

After Israel battled the Amalekites on their travels from Egypt and Moses' prayers for victory were answered as Aaron and Hur held up his tired hands,

the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it ... Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, 'For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD' (Exodus 17:14–16 NIV).³³

Wanting to encourage his followers 'to pray always and not to lose heart', Jesus told a parable about 'a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people' (Luke 18:2). Jesus wanted his listeners to learn a message from the judge's eventual relenting to the widow's request (Luke 18:6–8).

These passages have similar lines of thought, presented in different orders. Paul moved from a statement about Scripture to its purpose in growing faith and producing good works. The Exodus passage moves from Joshua and those with him, to Moses praying for them with Aaron and Hur's help, to God's instruction to record their victory.³⁴ Jesus' parable commences with concern about people's faith when praying, to God to whom we are praying, and then to God's determination to grant justice.

God is our helper

It is appropriate to consider the ways we cope in crises by reflecting on prayer, Scripture and faith in God's justice. Central to all three readings is the personal action of God in helping his people. Moses, for example, needed to keep his hands up not to convince God to defeat the enemy, but to encourage his people to trust God for victory. Paul urged attention to the Scriptures because studying God's story can give us wisdom about salvation, and so bring us healing and victory over

³³ Exodus 17:14–16 NRSV: Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: ... And Moses built an altar and called it, The LORD is my banner. He said, 'A hand upon the banner of the LORD'.

³⁴ Issues regarding attitudes that are attributed to God in various Old Testament narratives need careful consideration, including in the context of the role assigned by God for his people to be a priest-kingdom among all the nations (e.g. Exodus 19:5, 6).

evil. For Paul, the Scriptures are necessary so that we are not easily side-tracked and deceived by evil's self-declared brilliance, or by its false ideas. We are to live 'in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom' (2 Timothy 4:1).

Hands lifted up

To be in the presence of the judge of the living and the dead may terrorise us or drive us to the lobbying mentality of the woman towards the unjust judge, unless we hear what Jesus said in this story:

- God's people know they need deep, intimate, personal and emotional communication with God through prayer (Luke 18:1).
- God brings about justice for his people when they face difficulties and distress: 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night' (Luke 18:7)?
- God's justice comes speedily according to his time-schedule, though this may not be obvious to those trusting him: 'Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them' (Luke 18:7, 8).
- True faith trusts God for both his justice and his timing (cf. Luke 18:8).

Those who cry out to God day and night are not primarily crying out because of their own indignation, nor are they parading themselves before God to curry his favour. Rather, they have heard his promises and trust his timing.

It was in and through Christ's crucifixion that God vindicated himself and those who have faith in him. God's people accept that the crux of history primarily involves sinners in God's hands and not God in sinners' hands. Because God put himself in the hands of sinners, we can know grace and mercy as sinners in God's hands, in crucified, bloodied, pierced, holy, loving, praying hands. Hands that healed and helped and that broke loaves and fishes became hands that were lifted up by angry rulers. Hands that were not in the end lifted and held up by friends. Hands held by more than a horizontal beam of wood attached to a long pole. Hands held by the gracious, forgiving mercy of God the Father at work in his beloved Son through the Holy Spirit. Hands that were later lifted up as he blessed his disciples and friends, and now bless their brothers and sisters throughout every century. Glorified hands now holding 'seven stars', holding his church, holding you and me, holding us together, and preparing us for 'his appearing and his kingdom' (Revelation 1:16–20; 2 Timothy 4:1).

I appeal to you based on love

Philemon

Useful

Paul's letter to Philemon is remarkable for its tenderness and affection. Onesimus means useful, as understood from the fact of his being a slave.

Paul wrote affirming words to Philemon, Onesimus' owner (Philemon 1:1–7). Paul's request also indicates Paul's deep affection for Philemon (Philemon 1:8, 9). Paul was sending Onesimus back with a statement of affection that correlates with his message to Philemon. One can only imagine the way Philemon and the believers who met in his home responded to these affirming messages and Paul's request regarding Onesimus when this letter was first read out to them (Philemon 1:11–16)!

Partners

The cost of Paul's request to Philemon would have been considerable:

... if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account (Philemon 1:17, 18).

Philemon, in accepting Onesimus as a brother would lose a slave. This loss would have an economic impact on Philemon's lifestyle. Other slaves could reasonably want freedom as well and could be expected to struggle with Onesimus' freedom. They may mistreat Onesimus, adding an extra layer of complexity for Philemon. Philemon might be thought of as weak in accepting Onesimus back without punishing him or engaging in self-righteous revenge. Other slave-owners could be expected to criticise Philemon partly because his actions might threaten their domination over their slaves and partly because their slaves might want to use what happened to Onesimus for their own understandable benefit.

There were nonetheless advantages to Philemon in having a newly converted Onesimus as a brother and not as a slave. Onesimus would be a valuable Christian colleague in the pagan society at Colossae. Onesimus would be a willing worker rather than a reluctant slave and because of his recent contact with Paul would be a great encouragement to the church in Philemon's home.

In love

Paul was so confident of Philemon's response and of his own release from prison that he asked for the guest room to be made ready for his next visit (Philemon 1:22). Paul's confidence was based not on issuing a command but on his appeal from love (Philemon 1:9).

Paul's letter to Philemon reflects something of what Jesus told his listeners about their priorities (Luke 14:26–28).

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If Philemon was to respond positively to Paul's appeal for a love-response, then Philemon was to count his own interests as nothing and lay aside his own domestic concerns by accepting his former slave as a brother (cf. Philippians 2:1–18).

Jesus' emphasising that the greatest command is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves underlines Paul's message to Philemon. This command is not one priority among many others, or even a top priority. It means loving God is our only priority, and this love flowing in rivers of kindness and generosity to other people.

Paul encouraged Philemon to treat Onesimus as if Onesimus were Paul (Philemon 1:17–20). Paul wanted Philemon not to serve his own self-interests, but to love his former slave as himself, and as he loved Paul!

The power of Jesus' words in Luke 14 about being his disciple may have shocked his hearers concerning any complacency. His message may have opened their hearts into the truth that Jesus lived and acted that way, and that he was commanding them to live in his love by carrying their own crosses.

Jesus carried his cross in total redeeming love. Our love does not redeem but declares God's redemption to other people (John 15:9–17). The first letter of John described God's love and our appropriate response (1 John 4:10–11).

Paul wrote along the same lines to the Romans (Romans 5:6–8).

Jesus' single-minded love makes all other affections seem to be hatred by comparison. Jesus did not mean that these other affections were necessarily contrary to God's love or always in conflict with his love, but that they were richest when understood as expressions of his gracious and merciful love.

Do we need to be shocked by Jesus words and re-hear his message that love for God is total and free, but never cheap or easy? Do we need to be reminded that love does not respond with aggressive force or coercion but, as Paul wrote to Philemon, acts out of love (Philemon 1:9)?

Paul's appeal to Philemon was like the one he sent to the Roman church (Romans 12:1–3; cf. Philippians 3:7, 8).

The story of Philemon comes to us with a message that transforms all forms of workplace and social power constructs.

Johannine Writings

The baptism of John

John 1:6–28

Among you stands one ...

John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal’ (John 1:26, 27).

Paul, ‘by the grace given to me’, urged his readers ‘not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned’ (Romans 12:3). By what, or by whom, are we to assess our own value and have ‘a sane estimate of [our] capabilities’ (Romans 12:3, J.B. Phillips New Testament)?³⁵

John’s statements include several thoughts:

- ‘I baptise with water’ (John 1:26). Peter later wrote that baptism is effective, not through ceremonial performance, but as an appeal to God that he would grant clean consciences based on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ as Lord (1 Peter 3:20ff).
- ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know’ (John 1:26). Paul wrote to the Philippian church of how he came to regard his own accomplishments as refuse and garbage for the sake of knowing Christ. He wanted ‘to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ (Philippians 3:7–11). Jesus indicated that eternal life is knowing God as Father, and himself as the Father’s Son – as his ‘sent one’ (John 17:1ff). Jesus believed that through his death on the cross a renewed creation would be established for all God’s chosen family (cf. John 1:29–35).
- ‘I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal’ (John 1:27). Who can call out other than with the Baptist when faced with Jesus, as true God and true humanity, having come to deal the death blow to death, to bring immortality to mortal humanity, to become sin for us so freeing us from its horrible guilt and dreaded curse, and to wash away the filth of our prostitution to perverse idols? Who can protest about any inherent, self-derived, personal worthwhileness? To declare one’s self-sufficiency is, as John mentioned, to not truly know Christ Jesus.

³⁵ *New Testament in Modern English, The,*

Prepare the Lord's way

To pursue these themes further means examining John's message concerning Jesus as Messiah, and not treating what he said as the religious leaders of John's day did. There are at least three themes to John's message:

- 'Make straight the way of the Lord' (John 1:23)! We are to prepare for his coming according to his ways, and we are to prepare for his way according to who is coming. The one who comes is regal. He comes with incredible credentials. He comes as Immanuel, as God with us. He does not arrive among humanity as a divine apparition, celestial agent, cosmic representative or superhuman megastar. He comes as God and comes to be *with us*. Not only is he the Son of God, he is God the Son. He is the Son of Man who was anticipated would come with the clouds of heaven, and to whom the Father as the Ancient of Days would give all authority, glory and sovereign power. He is the one with a kingdom that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13, 14). He is the one who was and is at his Father's side, full of grace and truth. He is the one whose glory is the glory of his Father (John 1:14ff), and whose anointing for atoning ministry is by the Holy Spirit (John 1:29–35)

What then is his mission? What is his glory? Is it not to destroy the false kingdoms of this world? Is it not to overthrow the prince of darkness and his fellow devils (cf. John 1:5)? Didn't Jesus come to give darkness an hour so that humanity could inherit eternity? Did he not die on a cross to expel the prince of this world, and to overcome this world's systems and empires (John 12:27ff)? Yes, he came to conquer, to bring God's reign to reality, and to send the Holy Spirit of God! Yes, he came to resurrect the dead carcasses of sinful humanity into a mighty renewed humanity (cf. Ezekiel 37) and to tear down all the strongholds of evil.

- The incarnation is nonsense unless Jesus not only shared our humanity but also took our judgement, guilt and sin, and dismantled and destroyed it in his death. That is why John the Baptist declared 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29).

Here is the essence of the gospel. Here is the most regal and royal activity in all human history. Here is the key of the kingdom. The great work of the Spirit in Christ, of Christ by the Spirit, of the Father through his Son, of the Son in obedience to his Father, of the Spirit of the Father, and of the Father of the Spirit is to, in the pure holy fire of their embracing gracious love, face all human iniquity, including our own, with the repulsion that such holiness and love must bring to sin, wickedness depravity and evil in creating a renewed heavens and earth.

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- John's message concerned someone who would be God's king among all humanity, whose regal ministry would be to pour out the Holy Spirit of God on all who receive him. This would not just be the innate result of a glorious and mystical confluence of divine and human nature in the person of Christ. John said his water baptism was of little value when compared to the coming baptism in the Spirit. What is this Spirit-baptism, but the outpouring of the person of God to flood the hearts of desolate and dreary humanity? Paul wrote that the love of God has flooded into us as God's personal gift of encouragement and hope by and through the Spirit of Messiah. The Spirit who came at Pentecost is the Spirit of Messiah. This Spirit is the same Spirit who led, directed, and equipped Jesus for and in everything he did – as humanity among humanity, as God with us in human flesh. All that Jesus did he did in, through and by the Holy Spirit as a human person for humanity.

The breath of God was given to him in order that, as conqueror over all evil empires, he would then be sovereign among humanity to pour out the life of God into the decadent and dead hearts of those who would receive him (John 1:9–18). This is the great fruit of the cross. This is that of which John wrote that 'as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified' as commentary on Jesus saying 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:37–39). These are the streams of God; his gift of the Spirit of the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah.

Abandon illusions and anticipate fullness

To see these truths is to abandon illusions about ourselves and our ambitions, and to hear again why it was that Jesus believed that John the Baptist was, up to his day, the greatest person who had lived (Matthew 11:11). John saw Jesus for who he was, and for what he was to do. John knew, for all his possible later doubts, why none of us is worthy to undo Messiah's shoelaces. The least in the kingdom are greater than John by receiving what John and the prophets could only anticipate (cf. John 1:14–16).

We are those on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:11; cf. Hebrews 9:11-14)!

Living water

John 7:37–39

Jesus stood in the place of dryness

Jesus was standing at the heart of Israel's religion, not to condemn it but to fulfil it! His message was that we are created to thirst, but not to be left thirsty (John 7:37–39; e.g. Psalms 1:1–3, 42:1, 63:1, 2).

The Israelites of Jeremiah's day were thirsty because of two evils:

Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (Jeremiah 2:11–13; cf. Proverbs 4:23, 25:26).

Jesus promised and provides living water

When Jesus was thirsty on the cross (John 19:25–30), he secured the promise he had made at the festival, fulfilling the psalmist's cry for restoration while being drained, desolate and dishevelled (Psalm 22:11–15).

Jesus' promise was first fulfilled in the house where his disciples were hiding after his resurrection and before his ascension (John 20:19–23). It was fulfilled at and after Pentecost (Acts 2:4–33) and will ultimately be fulfilled in the renewed creation (Revelation 7:14–17, 22:1–17; cf. Psalm 104). This gift of the Holy Spirit was a fulfilment of Jesus' promise to the woman at the well (John 4:10ff) and explained his reference to the thirsty rich man in the parable about Lazarus (Luke 16:24).

These words of Jesus on the last day of the festival make the exhortation of the angel to the seven churches in the book of Revelation even more significant. The exhortation to have ears that hear the Spirit's messages to the churches related to fullness of life as well as containing warnings about dangers (Revelation 2:7, etc.).

The good shepherd

John 10:1–10

The shepherd and guardian of your souls

... my shepherd ... leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul ... my cup overflows (Psalm 23:1ff).

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture (John 10:9).

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:25).

These three passages concerning God as our shepherd reveal a clear contrast. In Psalm 23 we read of having our needs met even in the presence of our enemies. The shepherd described in that psalm is with us even in the valley of deadly shadows. In the Gospel reading, Jesus described a thief who comes to steal, kill and destroy, while Jesus, as a good shepherd, brings abundant life and sure leadership, with his sheep knowing and responding to his voice (John 10:1–10). In his first epistle, Peter advised those experiencing unjust suffering. He did this by reminding them that their 'shepherd and guardian' trusted himself to God who judges justly without retaliation (1 Peter 2:20–25).

We often face the contrast between human self-sufficiency and depending on Jesus as the good shepherd. To be sheep of the good shepherd is to depend on him as we relate to those around us. This shepherd is ruler over and provider for his sheep, and they delight in obeying him and in seeking fulfilment in being his flock. This shepherd finds them pasture and still waters. This shepherd ensures they reach their true destiny. This shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This shepherd 'bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness'. It is by this shepherd's wounds that we have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

We need no reminding about how easily we wander off after many other shepherds, who in the end turn out to be thieves. Rather than bring fulfilment, they drain our God-given resources and leave us weary, defeated, empty, bitter, angry, and even sick. Death sets in, not life. We can readily deceive ourselves about our false shepherds! The miracle is that the Lord, our shepherd, is with us in the valley of the shadow of death. He comforts us when we are faced with our failure. His comforts us as he prods us away and protect us from evil. Or as Jesus put it, when the wolf or the thief come, he defeats them – not as a hired labourer, but at the expense of his own life. This is aligned with Isaiah's prophecy about God's servant's silent while suffering oppression and enduring pain, and is what we celebrate each Easter:

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he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:7)

Peter quoted from this passage when explaining Jesus' complete identification with his sheep when they face evil (1 Peter 2:22). Jesus 'entrusted himself to the one who judges justly' in identifying with us in this way (1 Peter 2:23).

Abundant life

No wonder the psalmist wrote that he would fear no evil, and that the good shepherd would restore his sheep. The good shepherd of which Jesus spoke is one with his sheep in the battles, and so is more than able to bring them to and comfort them by still waters. Peter echoed this understanding when he wrote of the shepherd's ability to heal the wounds of his sheep.

It is up to us to decide whether we will fight our battles under Jesus as the good shepherd, or whether we will be led astray by other shepherds. Thankfully, his sheep know his voice. We would never follow our shepherd and guardian without the assurance of his voice. Then, instead of arriving with him at still waters, we would find ourselves restless, like a polluted ocean that casts up mire, mud and other debris from defeats, wrecks and ruins. Instead of green pastures, we would only know barren, dry desolate deserts: 'My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and have hewn out broken dams for themselves, which can hold no water' (Jeremiah 2:13; cf. Proverbs 25:26; Psalm 68:6).

Let us be like those who return to our good shepherd. Let us trust him for all our needs, and for the restoration and healing he brings. Then, depending on him alone, our cup will flood over. Then, trusting him completely, will we gladly dwell in his presence for ever. The contrast could hardly be clearer (Psalm 107:33–35, 41–43).

A new commandment

John 13:32–35

The old commandment was love!

God's love, and our response in love, is referred to many times in John's Gospel.³⁶ What did Jesus mean when he said that loving one another was 'a new commandment' when the old one was love (John 13:34)? The expert in the law who asked concerning eternal life knew that the law required him to love 'the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). Luke wrote that the legal expert wanted 'to justify himself' when he asked Jesus who his neighbour was, so precipitating Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30ff).

Another teacher of the law wanted to test Jesus and asked him to name the greatest commandment. Jesus replied that the most significant commandment – the one that had top priority – was to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. Jesus then nominated the second most important as loving our neighbour as ourselves and indicated that they were central to everything in the Jewish and Hebrew law and the messages of their prophets (Matthew 22:34–38).

As I have loved you

Jesus told his disciples that they could not go with him to where he was headed and that his absence from them would occur very soon. Jesus used this context to emphasise afresh that love was at the heart of all he was doing and teaching:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:33–35).

The essence of the law was and remains love. Jesus redefined the locus of the Mosaic love-commandment to himself. His message was that God's love is fleshed out in his humanity as Son of God. When Jesus said that his disciples were to love 'Just as I have loved you', his statement was filled with human warmth, wisdom and dignity (John 13:34). It is therefore worth asking what characteristics Jesus assigned to this love with which we are to love:

³⁶ See John 3:16, 35, 5:20, 42, 10:17, 11:3, 5, 36, 13:1, 23, 34, 14:15, 21–23, 31, 15:9, 12, 17, 16:27, 17:23, 24, 26, 20:2, 21:15.

Love is given

Jesus' love is from his Father. We are given his Father's love in, by and through his Son. It is the Father who gives his Son in love, and the Son who offers himself to us and his Father in love.

Love is obedient

Jesus repeatedly linked his obedience to his love for his Father and his Father's love for him. He said that is how it is to be between us and him and his Father.

Love is total

Jesus' life provides the definition of what love is and what love does. In him God's love is incarnate, human and sacramental: 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1:14). Jesus was addressing not so much what love *is*, as what love *does* in initiating relational action with other people. Love did not come to only to fill a definition in humanity, but to achieve a purpose in and for humanity. Love did not come simply to live, but to die. The goal of Jesus' love is, through his obedience, to fulfil all righteousness by laying down his life for his friends.

Love is victorious

Jesus was victorious because of what he accomplished. From this fountainhead comes the reality of human renewal and resurrection. We are caught up in the trinitarian love-unity of God which overcomes the world as we live in his love. It is God's love-unity with which we are identified and which we declare as our message by our lives and words.

Love is impossible

Outside of God's love we do no better than Peter and the other disciples did when they did not comprehend Jesus' life and message. Much as Peter wanted to love by laying down his life, he was only able to truly love his Messiah and Master because of Jesus' death on the cross (cf. 1 Peter 1:8, 9).

Not left orphaned

John 14:15–21

True family

Jesus' promise that 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you' was far from academic or romantic (John 14:18). He spoke to the urgent necessities facing his disciples because of his imminent death. His words were not a piece of convenient pietism or some soothing spirituality. They now relate to the desperate desires of our society, and provide an anchor for listening, wise and discerning people.

Where are we to find true family? The answer is the same today as it has always been: God. Jesus taught that God is Father and that we can be born again (John 3:1ff). He said we can know God's love and the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit as God's family, and that we can hear his word and do his will as his people (John 13–17). Jesus' promise remains unchanged: God is Father, and in relating to God, healing can come to ourselves and our communities. God's fatherhood is central to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and in this last conversation with his disciples before his crucifixion.³⁷

We are encouraged by those who pray with us and by the refreshment the Holy Spirit gives us. We are heartened by those who want to learn of God's love for us from reading our Scriptures together. We are cheered when we are included as brothers and sisters and forgiven of our weaknesses and failures.

True home

Peter was with Jesus in this upper room, and later wrote of God's redeeming love being revealed to us:

Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

Here we find Jesus and his Father are at work together on the same task. Here we read of the Father sending his Son, and of his Son delighting to do his Father's will. Here we see that their goal and purpose is 'to bring us to God'; to bring us home. Peter's statement links with Jesus' earlier words to his disciples when Jesus shared with them that

I go to prepare a place for you, [and] I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am (John 14:1, 2).

Where is Jesus? He is 'close to the Father's heart' (John 1:18). Where does he take us? To the abundance of his 'Father's house' where he said that

³⁷ God's fatherhood does not mirror or endorse human patriarchy.

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there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:1–3).

Here is our only hope. Here is true family. Here is evidence of Jesus' promise that we will not be left orphaned!

True life

Peter's first letter describes Jesus being 'made alive by the Spirit' (1 Peter 3:18). The same Spirit who was with Jesus throughout his life, including as he died, is the same Spirit who made him alive again, and who Jesus now sends to be with us (cf. John 1:32, 3:34, 7:39, 14:17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:13, 20:22)! Jesus' reference to being adopted means being in God's family with and in him!

Jesus' resurrection is central to all history, and to our personal history. If God does not raise the spiritually dead by the Spirit today, we would despair because of our guilt. Unless God does something with us, we are left orphaned and destined for the dust of death. Unless God raised Jesus from the dead, we have no ultimate basis for being confident in God when facing life's difficulties and dilemmas. Unless our heavenly Father, through his Son, and by his Spirit, raises us from the deadness of our sinful defiance, we will never know true family, we will never know his Spirit, and we will never truly cry 'Father' (cf. Ephesians 3:14–21).

Comfort in judgement

John 15:1–8

Jesus the true vine

Jesus used a picture of Israel when calling himself the true vine. The vine was a national symbol found on coins. Vines are useful for their fruit, but not for their wood. Vines were used by the prophets when describing the nation's coming judgements. Israel, the prophets declared, had been planted well, but had produced poor fruit and/or had become fruitless, and God's judgements were necessary if abundant, good quality fruit was to be produced (Psalm 80:8ff; Isaiah 5:1ff; Jeremiah 2:21, 5:10, 6:9, 8:13; Ezekiel 15:2ff, 17:3ff, 19:10ff, Hosea 10:1ff; cf. Hosea 14:7; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10, 8:12; Malachi 3:11).

In referring to himself as a vine, Jesus kept its context of fruit and judgement, but adapted the vine symbol by developing several new emphases:

The LORD, the vine-grower, is called Father

In naming himself as 'the true vine', he described his Father as vine-grower (John 15:1). Israel, by implication, had failed in its calling as God's family, as the LORD's covenant son, and Jesus had come as the authentic son (cf. Hosea 11:1; John 1:10–18). In identifying himself as God's true son, Jesus indicated that there is no authentic family of God outside of his relationship with God (John 15:5). Jesus' followers, as branches of the true vine, glorify his Father by being fruitful (John 15:8; cf. Jeremiah 9:23 and 24 where Israel could only be God's true people by glorifying God).

Israel's true identity is in Jesus

Israel's true life is only possible in this vine. Only by abiding in Jesus, by the Spirit, is this life fruitful. Just as fruitless wood on the vine is useless, so 'apart from me' means being burnt in 'the fire'. Dead works are in stark contrast to live fruit (John 15:3–6, 26, 27).

Jesus declared that anyone who abides 'in me' is already cleansed, and by pruning, produces more abundant and permanent fruit. Fruit is not produced 'by itself', but 'much fruit' is grown in Christ. Jesus contrasts none and plenty, not a little (on our own) and more in Christ (John 15:4, 5).

Jesus nominated some of the fruit that comes from a life that abides in him. Righteousness, love and joy are described as flowing through us to other people, so glorifying his Father (John 15:3, 9–11). His disciples were his 'friends', and they would be given whatever they asked of his Father 'in my name' (John 15:7, 12–17). In this way, God's people share in his sonship. The Spirit nourishes them in the vine, just as he sustained Jesus as Son of God (cf. Mark 1:1, 10; Galatians 5:22, 23; Philippians 1:11).

We are pruned (cleansed) in him

Jesus added that true love forfeits one's own life for one's friends (John 15:13), so pointing out what it meant for him that we are his 'branches'. He indicated that the true vine is pruned, as was the false one. God is not tolerant of evil. His holiness, righteousness and love cleanses. This purification occurs by being the true vine and by him having us as its branches. We are pruned in him, and not apart from him (cf. Isaiah 53:8, 40:1; John 13:1ff). This pruning symbolises being cleansed by his word:

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you (John 15:2, 3).

This passage opposes ecclesiastical leaders who replicate the false behaviours of the religious leadership of Jesus' era, or those which the prophets opposed. The healing action of God's peaceful grace and mercy evident in Jesus' sacrificial suffering and death radically contrasts the harsh and cruel brutality of power-driven religious and political domination which he opposed.

Abiding in Christ

There is comfort in judgement because we are cleansed and pruned in him, and not apart from him. To abide in Christ is to submit to God. In the context of this passage this means

- acknowledging our inability to bear true fruit of ourselves. We bear false fruit outside of Christ (John 15:4, 5).
- accepting our rebellion against God. Abiding in Christ is abiding in his love, and outside of his love means hostility and hatred towards him and his Father (John 15:6, 9, 18, 19, 23–25, cf. 3:20, 7:7, 17:14).
- accepting that God is right in opposing sin by love, and that Father, Son and Spirit all act together (John 15:2, 10–14; cf. Psalm 7:11).
- praying the tax collector's rather than the Pharisee's prayer (Luke 18:13).
- longing that God will bring a rich harvest by remembering his covenant mercy (cf. Habakkuk 3:1, 2; Luke 1: 67–79, 22:8–20).

To abide in Christ is to be cleansed by the sovereign, triune action of the Father, Son and Spirit in and through the cross, freeing us from condemnation and forgiving us. Jesus, with love and integrity, and at his Father's pleasure, lovingly says to us through the Holy Spirit, that our sins are forgiven (cf. Luke 7:48; John 8:11). To receive this forgiveness and cleansing is the true comfort of judgement; it is true abiding in Christ.³⁸

³⁸ The only violence is evil's action against the sin-removing Lamb of God.

The cross – the way home

John 19:28–30

Hero or martyr?

What are we to make of the sufferings of Jesus? Was he a fearless hero? Was he a noble martyr? Was the death of Jesus the finest example of human defiance in the face of the greatest provocation of human depravity?

To call Jesus a hero is to declare him brave against great odds and to imply he was fearlessness, full of self-confidence and defiant of danger. Yet a careful reading of his prayers and of his words to his disciples, the crowd and to the religious and political rulers, hardly reveals Jesus as someone who saw himself as heroic. Those issues were settled in the wilderness when Satan tempted him to leap from the top of the temple and to turn stones into bread.

To call him a martyr is to say he was someone whose great suffering was for a noble cause or a notable principle. Yet Jesus was not seeking esteem or recognition by claiming he was doing good deeds or serving popular causes. When he said he would gather people to himself, his context was oncoming victory and revelation of his Father's glorious majesty and not martyrdom.

Jesus did not go to the cross as a hero seeking glory or as a martyr defeated serving a great cause. He went to the depths of his sufferings to secure a victory, to defeat an enemy, to gather the family of God together and to reveal the nature of God by sending God's Holy Spirit.

Example?

We may think that his death simply illustrates God's character on the canvas of human history and that God's purpose was merely to provide the greatest and perfect example of life for us to follow. While Jesus is not best understood as a great hero or a tragic martyr, he does provide an example and a pattern. To see the dimensions of his sufferings is to be deeply stirred:

Wore the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.³⁹

What was so amazing about his love? Why does it demand and receive, and why has it demanded and received, so total a response from so many people? The words Jesus spoke from the cross help us find the essence of what was in his heart. They resonate with the deepest issues we experience in our greatest times of anguish.

³⁹ Isaac Watts, 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,' <https://hymnary.org/hymn/AM2013/157a>.

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Let us consider one of those sayings. When Jesus spoke of his obvious thirst, the author of John's Gospel stated that Jesus was aware that 'all was now finished' and the Jesus was about finalising his testimony to their Scriptures. After receiving some 'sour wine ... he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit' (John 19:28–30).

Jesus did not say 'I am finished'. His announcement was not from one who thought he was spent and defeated, and who expected to fade dismally into death. The other Gospels indicate that his final words were spoken with a loud voice, while this account tells us that his lips were moistened with a sponge soaked in wine vinegar before he gave his final utterances. He did not see himself as at his terminus! According to Luke, just before dying, he called out 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:44–46). He saw himself going home to his Father. He expected to be with the thief in Paradise (Luke 23:36–43). According to his earlier statements to his disciples, he had in mind his subsequent resurrection and ascension (Matthew 27:63; Mark 9:31, 10:34; Luke 18:33, 24:7, 46).

Jesus also did not say 'I have finished'. He did not see this as his final action. There was much to be done. He had previously told his disciples how, having gone to his Father, he would send another comforter – the Holy Spirit. He had spoken of their grief turning to joy, and of his working with his Father to, by this Spirit, bring all creation to understand the truth of his crucifixion.

Listening to his teaching explains what he believed was finished. In his final discourse to his disciples, he declared great victories (cf. John 16:7–15):

- Sins are forgiven, and relationships restored under a new covenant for which he 'poured out' his blood 'for many'. He had declared that he would draw everyone to himself when he was 'lifted up from the earth' (Matthew 26:28; John 12:32).
- The world and the flesh are overcome by the reign of God, and Jesus' followers can be encouraged and be at peace even while facing persecution (John 12:31, 16:33)!
- The ruler of this world was defeated and exposed as powerless and was replaced by the Holy Spirit revealing Jesus' righteousness and love for the Father (John 12:31, 14:30, 31).

These victories declare what was finished. In defeating death, sin was forgiven, the world-system was overthrown, and demonic rulers were judged.

In Jesus' death, the incarnation was at full stretch. It was there that by taking our fallen nature upon himself and coming in the 'likeness of sinful flesh', Jesus did what the law could not achieve of itself (Romans 8:1–4).

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It is there that he became ‘sin for us’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). If the incarnation is only a fine example, a divine drama, an illustration of God’s forgiving nature then God was toying with us and Jesus’ sufferings were only make-pretend. If nothing was accomplished concerning sin, the world, the flesh and the devil, then we are to be pitied for kidding ourselves about God. We are those who have been seduced by a facade of pretence in Jesus’ suffering.

The way back home to God

God was not play-acting but was moving into the deepest depths of human deceit and filth. His cross provided the antiseptic that deals with all the poisonous sick intentions of our perverse hearts. In his last hours he disarmed the prince of this world and destroyed that kingdom. Jesus’ leap into death was his declaration that death itself no longer has any grip and that God is with us even in the valley of death’s darkness and desolation.

The greatness of what Jesus accomplished was not simply in these seeming negatives. It may be helpful to be reminded of the prodigal son, of his coming to himself, of his memory of his father and his home, of his arising and going to his father content to be his father’s servant; and to recall his father’s seeing him from a long way off and running to meet him. It may assist us to remember his father’s refusal to hear his son’s confession as he embraced his lost son and called for the royal ring of renewed sonship, the robe of honour and declared the day of feasting and celebration ‘for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’ (Luke 15:24).

It is the cross of Christ that reveals the way back home to God. Jesus came from the Father to find lost humanity in our alien environments, to raise us from the death of our destruction and bring us home to his welcoming Father – not as refugees and rebels, not as servants and slaves, but as forgiven, renewed, family. We are accepted and adopted into the family from which we abdicated and forfeited our inheritance. Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. And our Father’s Paradise awaits the arrival and revelation of every child of God from every language, nation and generation.

Peace be with you

John 20:19–21

Peace with God

One of Paul's declarations to the Roman church focused on them having been given 'peace with God' (Romans 5:1, 2).

John's Gospel records Jesus twice saying 'Peace be with you' when meeting his disciples behind closed doors soon after his resurrection (John 20:19–23).⁴⁰

Jesus showed them his hands and his side

The context of Jesus' first declaration of peace to his disciples was his showing 'them his hands and his side' (John 20:20). The message they were given was that God's gifts of peace were central to Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul pointed out that because of Christ's death, we are justified, we have peace with God, and we have access to 'this grace in which we stand' (Romans 5:1–11; cf. Romans 3:23ff).

Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them

The context of Jesus' second declaration of peace to his disciples was his breathing the Holy Spirit on them. He was sending them as the Father had sent him, as Messiah, Anointed One, and so it was essential that they received the Spirit for their journeys ahead. They were to go in forgiveness, proclaiming forgiveness. His word would be fully effective in their hands. They were to learn what Paul summarised for the Roman church:

... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:3–5).

⁴⁰ Jesus used the same greeting a week later when Thomas was with the rest of Jesus' disciples (John 20:24–29).

Peace

John 20:19–23

Peace was central to his ministry

When Jesus said ‘Peace be with you’ to his disciples, his greeting was not a casual one. Peace was integral to every aspect of his life and death, and his resurrection and ascension.

Luke sets the context for Jesus’ ministry through his birth and baptism narratives. The song of Zechariah and the message of the angelic choir both focus on bringing peace to God’s people (Luke 1:76–79, 2:14). At Jesus’ baptism, the heavenly voice quoted from Isaiah 42:1–4 and the descent of the Holy Spirit ‘in bodily form like a dove’ on him both pointed to the place of peace in God’s plans (Luke 3:21, 22; cf. Genesis 8:8–12; Psalm 55:1–8).

The Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’ Scripture reading at Nazareth are peace oriented (Matthew 5:9; Luke 4:14–19). Peace was significant in Jesus’ ministry, whether walking on the water, healing a demoniac, healing Jarius’ daughter, or healing a woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 4:39, 5:15, 34). He also told the woman who anointed him in Simon’s house to ‘go in peace’ (Luke 7:50).

When sending his disciples out ‘in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go’ to ‘proclaim the good news [that] “The kingdom of heaven has come near”’, they were messengers of peace (Matthew 10:13, Luke 10:5; cf. Matthew 10:34–42). Peace was at the heart of the good news they brought of the reign of God through Messiah Jesus.

The response of ‘the whole multitude of the disciples’ to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey was one of loud and joyful praise for powerful actions they attributed to God’s ministry through Jesus:

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven (Luke 19:37, 38; cf. Psalm 118:26)!

The prophet Zechariah’s message had been that God’s people would rejoice because their triumphant and conquering king would arrive in humility, ‘riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ and would then ‘command peace to the nations’ (Zechariah 9:9, 10).

Jesus saw these joyful anticipations of peace in the context of a coming national disaster – a devastation they did not see as being ahead of them. His lament while weeping over Jerusalem was that they not only misunderstood what the future was for their beloved city, they also ‘did not recognize the time of [their] visitation from God’ (Luke 19:42–44).

The account in John’s Gospel of Jesus’ discourse with his disciples prior to his death can be read in this context. The peace Jesus brings is not as the world gives

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peace, it overcomes the world and the troubles the world brings (John 14:27, 16:33).

Peace is central for his messengers

Jesus validated his first greeting of peace by showing his hands and side as he stood among his disciples in the house where they were hiding. This peace was not lightly won, nor was it imposed on them as a burden to be maintained (cf. Jeremiah 8; Isaiah 53:5ff; Colossians 1:19–23; Romans 5:1–11).

Jesus' second peace greeting was also not just a momentary message. They received the Spirit for a purpose. He was sending them as his Father had sent him. They were to be messengers of forgiveness. Seeing their risen Lord was too light a thing for it to be only relevant to them (cf. Isaiah 49:6, 55:12, 57:14–21; Acts 10:34–38).

Jesus met his disciples, including Thomas, a week later with the same greeting. The author of John's Gospel linked Jesus' gospel and the signs that Jesus gave his disciples with his own goal in writing his account of Jesus' life and ministry (John 20:26–31).

Although Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace but a sword, his gospel was one of peace that would bring peace (Matthew 10:34–42). The political and religious 'sword' that smote him on the cross was countered by his victorious message of peace, symbolised in the descent of a dove at his baptism and by his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey.

His gift of peace is for us now. We are messengers of his peace now. God will demonstrate and accomplish his reign of peace through his people of peace. It is this peace that changes communities and nations. It is this peace that heralds and establishes the reign of God by the crucified and risen Son of God through the Spirit of the living God (Isaiah 66:12; Micah 4:1–5; Zechariah 4:6–10, 9:8–12; Ephesians 2:11–22).

Extra thoughts on peace

Peace features from the beginning of Genesis. The story of Cain and Abel was about peace with God and each other (Genesis 4:5–14; cf. Proverbs 14:30). Melchizedek was a king of peace (Genesis 14:18–20).

The prophecies in Isaiah frequently mention peace. A prince of peace was prophesied (Isaiah 9:2–7), perfect peace was promised (Isaiah 26:3, 12, 57:1, 2, 14–21), peace was proclaimed (Isaiah 52:7; cf. Ephesians 6:15; Zechariah 9:9–13), and peace was provided (Isaiah 55:12). The alternative to the distressful absence of peace (Isaiah 48:17–21, 59:1–8) is the universal peace predicted at the end of the book (Isaiah 66:10–13; cf. Isaiah 2:1–6, 11:1–10; Micah 4:1–5).

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Jeremiah and Ezekiel reinforced these messages, while Jonah wrestled with the ways the LORD achieves his purposes (Jeremiah 6:14, 15, 8:4–22; Ezekiel 13:10–16; Jonah 4:9).

Paul's epistles emphasise peace with God (Ephesians 2:14–18; Colossians 1:19–22; Romans 5:1–11). Peace is central to his exhortations, as it is with other New Testament authors (Colossians 3:12–17; Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22–24; Hebrews 12:11; James 3:17, 18).

Several benedictions remind various churches of God's gift of peace (e.g. Romans 15:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24; Hebrews 13:20, 21).

Who is he? Who am I?

Revelation 1:4–8, 17–19

A Christmas meditation

Why do we celebrate *his* birthday? Why is it covered up with so much commercialism? Why is it so readily turned into something that looks like a counterfeit? Who counterfeits something trivial, like a paper bag?

What happened? The Gospels speak about Mary, a virgin who conceived and gave birth to a son. How strange. Wise men followed a star. How strange that his birth was marked by an unusual cosmic event in apparent harmony with creation. Humble shepherds went to the manger. How strange that the unimportant became so significant. How strange that Herod, the astute political chief who became angry and slaughtered babies, missed *this* one.

Who is this one? This one reveals God's love with his crib at Christmas becoming his cross at Easter. The good news is that he makes our peace with God, so declaring and revealing God's love for us. This good news enables us, by his Holy Spirit, to fulfil the great commandment as our response.

Who is this one? John on Patmos wrote that he is 'the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. John declared that 'he loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' and that he 'is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail'. John testified that Jesus told him:

I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades (Revelation 1:4–8, 17, 18, cf. 5:1–14, 19:6–7, 11–16; 21:5–8, 22:12–21).

John's Gospel begins with a symphony of words about Jesus:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ...

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him ...

He came to what was his own ...

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ...

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (John 1:1–18, 'He has explained Him' (NASB); cf. Hebrews 1:1ff).

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John wrote in his first letter that 'God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:9, 10).

Paul declared that 'you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9; cf. Colossians 1:13–20; Philippians 2:5–11; Acts 20:35).

On Saturday night we saw a very beautiful sunset. Lake Albert shimmered like gold. Fiery crimson clouds were near where the sun was setting. The sky behind ranged from the dark blue of night to the pale blue of daylight. In such a context, thinking of Christmas was like a compass finding its true bearings. Who am I, when there are billions of others adversely affected by hunger, disease, war and various difficulties? Where am I on this ball of dirt and water spinning endlessly around a sphere of fire in a massive universe? What am I, considering my environmental and psychological conditioning? And when am I, alive for a few years near the start of a third millennium? Twenty centuries after a baby, conceived out of wedlock, was born in a small town in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. We date our calendar from his birth and consider this event worthy of stopping much of the world once a year.

The greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is complete and total love for God and neighbourly love as real and genuine as self-love (Matthew 22:37, 38). Such love cannot be merely one priority among many. It cannot even be top priority. It must be our only priority.

Jesus' words to Simon Peter after his resurrection focused on this love (John 21:15–17). Jesus' first question related to Peter's work, self, family, money and possessions. Jesus' second and third questions presented Peter with no comparisons and looked for Peter's unconditional response. The personal finds its context in the cosmic. Who we are is known from who he is. And who he is can be clearly understood:

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1:5b, 6).

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Conversations along the way

Conversations along the way records ideas and perspectives exploring biblical themes written over many years as rough drafts or more revised documents. I hope my thoughts may be enriching and encouraging. Where my writing suggests ideas and frameworks that vary from those held by other Christians, our common faith can keep us in community and help us explore and reconcile our differences. I hope readers with non-theistic and/or secular understandings can find some helpful common values, even though I have used what might seem to be merely a discussion of literary narratives, symbols and imaginations. Those with other religious belief systems may find fresh insights by sharing in my journey of faith-seeking-understanding, including where collisions of thought and practice emerge. To all readers, please forgive my short-comings and my inevitable and unhelpful biases, and may your reading bring you peace, joy and hope.

In this series

Living in Love and Freedom

Learning to Love Wisdom

In Triune Community

Meditations on Hope and Peace

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal: Volumes 1 and 2

Living Love

Travelling Together

Towards Eternity

Redefining

On Earth as in Heaven

Joys and Sorrows

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⁴¹ These two parishes included other small congregations. The Kapunda parish included Eudunda and Point Pass churches – we lived in the former schoolhouse on the northern edge of Point Pass.

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⁴² Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom*; *Learning to Love Wisdom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2019); *Redefining* (2022).

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In what ways are the fruit of the Spirit a revelation of who God is and the ways God acts in grace and mercy in, with, and through humanity to fulfil God's creative and creational purposes?

What insights did the Bible's authors have about living by faith and in hope during the transience, troubles and traumas they and their communities experienced?

These meditations take readers on a journey through some of these Scriptures. Readers may find valuable treasures and discover helpful insights into some deep, wonderful and encouraging mysteries relevant to their own living realities.

The first sections of *Meditations on Hope and Peace* cover the Old Testament. New Testament sections cover Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, letters not attributed to Paul or John, Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts, Paul's letters, and John's Gospel, John's letters and the book of Revelation.

