



Meditations *on* Resilience *and* Renewal

VOLUME TWO

Conversations along the way

Don Priest

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Volume Two

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
PART THREE: MYSTERY AND MISSION	3
LUKE'S GOSPEL AND ACTS	5
The tender mercy of our God	6
Promised mercy and holy covenant	6
Tender mercy and fierce anger	6
The gift of God's mercy	7
To you, a Saviour	9
Only to shepherds	9
An eternal doxology	9
Joyful good news	10
According to God's promises	11
God's favour	11
God's fullness	12
Rise and walk	14
His own town	14
He saw their faith	14
They were filled with awe	15
Messenger of the covenant	16
Are you the one who is to come?	16
Wisdom's children	17
Seeing the kingdom of God	18
But who do you say that I am?	18
Jesus went up on the mountain to pray	19
Look at my son	20
Finding the Father	21
Father or fate?	21
Theft or gift?	22
Rejection or acceptance?	23
The resurrection of Jesus	24
An idle tale?	24
The resurrection of the dead	25
Jesus rose, as he said	26
The promise of the Father	27
Jesus filled with the power of the Holy Spirit	27
See, it's me!	27
The Father's promise, Messiah's reign, and the Spirit's coming	28

The new community	30
By the river Jordan	30
On the day of Pentecost	31
Throughout creation	31
Peter heals a man who could not walk	33
Who was this man?	33
What was he given?	33
Who is this Jesus?	34
Philip and the Ethiopian	35
The sovereign Spirit	35
The witness of the word of God	35
The cruciality of the cross	36
The inheritance of grace (Part 1)	38
The word of his grace	38
Equipping and building up	39
Giving an inheritance	40
More blessed to give than to receive (Part 2)	41
Among all those who are sanctified	41
These hands worked hard to help the weak	41
Remembering the Lord's word about giving	42
Kneeling, praying, grieving, and accompanying	43
More blessed to give than to receive	44
The words of the Lord Jesus	44
God's giving has his signature	44
God's giving is authentic	44
God's giving is abundant	45
PAUL'S LETTERS	46
The resurrection of the dead	47
Resurrection hope	47
Resurrection life	48
The intercession of the Spirit	50
Even the depths of God	50
The holiness and power of the Spirit	50
New life in the Spirit	51
Future glory in the Spirit	52
God is for us	53
Coping in crises	53
God is holy and loving in judgement	54
God initiates redemption and intercession	54
God effects the defeat of evil in us	55
Even the depths of God	56
What is the fellowship of his Son?	56

What does it mean for God to be the source of your life?	57
Proclaiming Christ crucified	59
No divisions or boasting	59
The power and wisdom of God	59
The source of your life in Christ Jesus	60
Considering our own calling	61
All things to all people	62
True freedom serves other people	62
True weakness moves to other centre-points	63
True ministry lives the grace of the gospel	64
Faithful God	65
The salvation that saved us and the salvation that saves us	65
Four warnings	65
The ends of the ages and the never-ending ages	66
Warnings from the Exodus	68
Baptised into Moses	68
Idolatry, immorality, insurrection, and irritability	68
Restraint and promise	69
Same Spirit, same Lord, same God	72
Informed and understood	72
Their past and present	72
Their present and future	73
Unity and diversity	73
God was in Christ	75
God was reconciling the world to himself	75
Pure communion; pure mission	76
God is making his appeal through us	78
Reconciliation	80
God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself	80
The message of reconciliation	81
Now is the day of salvation	83
An acceptable time – a time of favour	83
A full acceptance of grace	83
The day of salvation	84
Hearts wide open	84
I have been crucified with Christ	86
No one will be justified by the works of the law	86
We are justified by faith in Christ Jesus	86
Christ's love in the life we now live	87
The promise to Abraham	88
Law as a way of justification and life	88
Christ as our justification and life	89
Life in the Father, Son and Spirit	90

Sarah and the promises of God	91
God's promises to Abram and Sarai	91
The slave woman and the free woman	91
God's promises will be fulfilled	92
Children of the promise	92
In him you also	93
You also	93
In him	93
To the praise of the Father of glory	94
A new humanity	96
God's works – not ours	96
A new humanity	97
Encouragement in Christ	99
Living worthy of the gospel	99
If then there is any	99
Complete my joy	101
The mind of Christ	102
Since	102
Therefore	103
At the name of Jesus	104
What is this passage's crescendo, its crowning statement?	104
Why does his Lordship provoke or evoke this confession?	104
What did Jesus do that deserved this honour?	104
What does the Father's glory mean for us?	105
Firstborn from among the dead	107
Christ is the head of his body, the church	107
All God's fullness	108
Reconciliation and peace through the blood of his cross	108
Our citizenship is in heaven	110
A crown of righteousness	110
Joy ahead	111
Pressing on	111
The grace of God has appeared	112
Ornaments to the doctrine of God our Saviour	112
The grace of God has appeared	112
Purified for Christ	113
God's saving goodness and loving kindness	114
Remind them and insist on these things	114
The goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour	114
Let no one look down on you or despise you	115
Grace be with you all	116
PART FOUR: INCARNATION AND APOCALYPSE	117

JOHN'S GOSPEL	118
We have seen his glory	119
In the beginning	119
... was the Word	120
And the Word become flesh	121
In him was life – 1	122
Who the people are	122
Who God is	122
What God does	123
In him was life – 2	124
In the beginning God	124
The Word became flesh	124
The Lamb of God	125
The Saviour of the world	126
Cleansing the temple – 3	127
My Father's house	127
Rebuilding the temple	128
Jesus is the true worshipper	129
Cleansing the temple – 4	130
Zeal for your house will consume me	130
I have come into deep waters	130
The true worshipper is the new temple	132
Seeing the kingdom of God	133
A Pharisee named Nicodemus	133
They found Jesus	133
Being born of the Spirit into the kingdom of God	134
God loved the world	136
God loves – we live	136
God's love is a gift	136
God's love is good news	137
The Father loves the Son	138
The one from above	138
The Spirit without measure	138
Citizens of the kingdom and worshippers in the temple	139
Go, and sin no more	141
Where are they?	141
Has no one condemned you?	141
Mercy and judgement are inseparable	142
The raising of Lazarus	144
Jesus is the resurrection and the life	144
Jesus wept	144
Seeing the glory of God	145

Those who believe in me will live	146
Jesus – lifted up	147
The gathering	147
His Father's voice	147
Judgement on worldly glory	148
Living in God's glory	148
He saw his glory	150
A grain of wheat	150
Unbelief	150
Belief	151
My Father is the vine-grower	153
The true vine	153
True branches	153
True love and true glory	155
True fruit	156
JOHN'S LETTERS AND REVELATION	158
Living in the light and love of God	159
Eternal life from God who is light and love	159
Jesus atones for the world's sins, including our own	159
An advocate <i>with</i> the Father <i>in</i> the Spirit	161
The justice that heals	162
Forgiven and cleansed	162
A better word	162
Our deepest wounds are healed through his deepest surgery	163
See what love!	164
Love is revealed	164
Love is given	164
Love is known	165
We will be like him	166
We are God's children now	166
We will see him as he is	166
We hope in him	167
In this is love	169
Whose love?	169
What is the essence of this love?	169
What results from this love?	171
Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him	172
The revelation which God gave Jesus Christ	172
Seeing the voice	173
Revealing God's priestly-kingdom-family	174
The two witnesses and the seventh trumpet	177
Measuring the temple, the altar, and the worshippers	177

Two witnesses: prophecy, death and resurrection	177
The seventh trumpet	178
The open temple and visible covenant-ark	179
A call for endurance and faith	180
The dragon and the two beasts	180
The first beast	180
The second beast	181
The Lamb's book of life	182
<i>Conversations along the way</i>	<i>184</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>185</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>186</i>

Introduction

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal 1 and 2 considers the resilience of Hebrew and early Christian communities as they sought sustainable renewal in the context of their resistance to unwelcome political, cultural and religious pressures. Whether by trusting God's covenant promises prior to the ministry of Jesus, or by the impact of his life, death and resurrection, their hope was in God's provision and care for their families, communities and God's creation. 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.

These books are edited collections of background notes written during sermon preparation. They are not academic papers and include little homiletical material. As with *Meditations on Hope and Peace*,¹ my collection of earlier similar resources, these notes are grouped by theme passages rather than in the order they were given or by the different locations in which they were presented. This arrangement 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 changing my original designs.

My interests focused on the ways 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, 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 in government country area and suburban secondary schools.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal 1 is in two sections. Part One, *Worship and Wisdom*, covers the Old Testament using categories from the Hebrew Bible. Part Two, *Presence and Absence*, covers Matthew's and Mark's Gospels and New Testament letters apart from those attributed to Paul or John.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal 2 is also in two sections. Part Three, *Mystery and Mission*, covers Luke's Gospel, the book of Acts and Paul's letters, while Part

¹ Don Priest, *Meditations on Hope and Peace* (2022). *Living in Love and Freedom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2017) includes a brief third group of sermon preparation notes in the *Living Treasures* section.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Four, *Incarnation and Apocalypse*, covers John's Gospel, John's letters and the book of Revelation.

These four 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 Resilience and Renewal 1 and 2 are 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 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 Resilience and Renewal 1 and 2 are published as a personal response to the biblical narratives of God's ongoing presence with his people, and as an acknowledgement that these experiences have been passed on to us by those who devoted themselves to sharing them 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 from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 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).

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Part Three:

Mystery and Mission

Luke's Gospel and Acts

The tender mercy of our God

Luke 1:67–79

Promised mercy and holy covenant

Zechariah spoke of God looking ‘favourably on his people’ and redeeming them (Luke 1:68). For him, this meant they would be rescued from their enemies and opponents (Luke 1:71). Zechariah understood John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ ministries in terms of this goal.

God’s grace was assured not because anyone could demand it, but because of the ‘mercy promised to our ancestors’ (Luke 1:72). God’s mercy was given because God remembered God’s holy covenant and not because they did! The ‘oath that [God] swore to our ancestor Abraham’ referred to the covenant God made with Abram, including where we read that Abram was told that they would be rescued from slavery and emerge wealthy after four centuries had passed (Genesis 15:13, 14, cf. 12:1ff).

Following the tragedy of the golden calf, God told Moses that God would be gracious and merciful at God’s own discretion and based on God’s own glorious, patient and abundant ‘steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Exodus 33:19, 34:6, 7).

Israel was given the mercy seat in the tabernacle and later in the temple to remind them of the mercies of God. God’s grace and mercy were directed at human guilt and misery.

Zechariah’s reference to a Saviour coming from David’s descendants pointed to many Davidic psalms where mercy is mentioned (e.g. Psalms 23, 25, 40, 51, 69, 103, 119 and 123). Other psalms relate to mercy without using the word (e.g. Psalm 60).

Along with references to the Davidic covenant (e.g. Psalm 89; 2 Samuel 7:1–29), Zechariah would have also had the Babylonian exile in mind (e.g. Isaiah 30:18, 55:7, 60:10; Jeremiah 16:5, 31:20, 33:26, 42:12; Lamentations 2:2, 21, 3:21; Ezekiel 39:25; Daniel 2:18, 6:11, 9:9; Habakkuk 3:2; Zechariah 1:12).

Tender mercy and fierce anger

A prophet wrote during the rape and destruction of Jerusalem about seeing ‘affliction under the rod of God’s wrath’. This prophet had hope because he was able to remember that

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ... For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone (Lamentations 3:1–33).

Habakkuk prayed along the same lines, while Hosea's description of God's thoughts may be even more poignant:

O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy (Habakkuk 3:2).

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; ... for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (Hosea 11:8, 9).

The prophets talked of God's fierce anger and tender compassion, but how are we to understand God's anger and compassion? Are they irreconcilable opposites, with mercy and wrath in an eternal, opposite relationship within God? Is God's wrath limited by God's mercy, which somehow underwrites God's judgements? Or is God's wrath the necessary action of God's mercy, making God's judgements the judgements of mercy? Is God's mercy the sole criterion by which God judges, with God's judgements the consequences for those who resist God's mercy (cf. Exodus 33:19, 34:6, 7)? Is this what the writer of Hebrews had in mind when writing of boldly approaching 'the throne of grace' for mercy and grace in desperate times (Hebrews 4:16)?

If this understanding is the case, then when God said to Hosea that he would not give Ephraim up to unrelenting judgement, that he would not act without compassion, and would not come in wrath without mercy, he was saying something remarkable. God, 'the Holy One in your midst' hoped they would see and know his tender mercies (cf. Hosea 11:1–11).

The gift of God's mercy

God's mercy not only means the removal of misery. It involves amazing gifts. Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, described some of these.

Zechariah spoke of the mercy promised in the holy covenant (Luke 1:72–75). The goal of this mercy is the service and worship that takes us into God's presence. It looks to a new Eden, an eternal city without a built temple because the Lord God Almighty and God's Lamb-Son are always present with God's people (Revelation 21:22–22:5).

Central to service and worship in this eternal sanctuary is God's gifts to God's people of forgiveness and salvation (Luke 1:77). Forgiveness is the work of Jesus as the God's Lamb who rescues God's humanity and removes the world's sin (John 1:29). He is the true high priest in the eternal sanctuary (Hebrews 7:26ff, 8:1ff, 9:11ff and 10:5ff).

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Zechariah also prophesied that

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:78, 79).

Renewed worship and service, offered by forgiven people, constitutes the dawn of an eternal city, of a divine Paradise where 'the way of peace' informs their community purpose and mutual participation; God's ultimate gift of mercy to fallen, rebellious humanity. It is on this basis that the prophet commanded God's people to shine with the LORD's light and glory that would break through darkness and dismay:

I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise (Isaiah 60:1–18).

To you, a Saviour

Luke 2:1–20

Only to shepherds

There is no mention in Luke's story of anyone seeing the angelic visitors apart from the shepherds. It might seem natural to think that a revelation of glory such as this would have been visible to many people and evident over some distance. Yet we are told that the 'angel of the Lord stood before *them*' and that 'the glory of the Lord shone around *them*' (Luke 2:9, italics added).

We learn that these shepherds were diligent workers; they were keeping watch. We find them 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen' (Luke 2:20). It was to them, personally, that the angel spoke. They were not super-shepherds without failures or struggles; they needed a Saviour.

The angels did not come to religious leaders, politicians, clergy, educators or financial gurus. They did not come to false shepherds like those about whom Ezekiel wrote (Ezekiel 34:1–10; cf. Jeremiah 23:1–8). The angels spoke to shepherds who were keeping watch – whatever their shortcomings might have been! The angel's message was clear: God, too, was keeping watch (Ezekiel 34:11–16; cf. Matthew 9:36), and now was the time for the birth of the Saviour. The time for the promised Messiah and Lord to be born had come.

This angelic visitation is a reminder of other Biblical stories. When a city was surrounded by an enemy army, Elisha prayed for his servant to see that 'there are more with us than there are with them' (2 Kings 6:16, 17). Those with Saul of Tarsus 'heard the voice but saw no one' (Acts 9:7). Angelic and divine manifestations are given personally to those concerned and come with the clearest of messages and the certainty of fulfilment.

An eternal doxology

The first occasion at which angels sang was creation, and the last time mentioned will be at the final demise of Babylon and the marriage of the Lamb and his bride (Job 38:1–7; Revelation 19:1ff, cf. 4:8–11, 5:9–14, 7:9–17, 15:3, 4). What did they sing at creation? Would it not have been like Psalm 8, where the majesty of God is clearly celebrated in his humanity which he has 'crowned with glory and honour' (Psalm 8:5)?

Is the angel's praise following the announcement to the shepherds a doxology expressing the theme of God's eternal covenant with his people, that he will be their God and they shall be his people (Genesis 17:7, 50:20; Exodus 6:7; Jeremiah 7:23; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9, 10; Revelation 21:7)? Is their joy the same joy that is in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7)? How rich and strong would the doxology of the angels be when one is born who brings the gift of redemption to the whole human race?!

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

This is the angelic message from the dawn of this creation to the dawn of the new creation. God is with God's people – God is *for* God's creation. There is great joy *for* all people – *for* all those whom God favours, *for* all those who know God's pleasure, grace, mercy and love. God's glory is in bringing his peace to the ends of the earth, and to all peoples.

Joyful good news

The angelic anthem was a heavenly response to the message the shepherds were given. The 'good news of great joy' was because a Saviour-Messiah-Lord had just been born in a nearby manger, and the shepherds could go and see God's promises being fulfilled!

God had promised peace through his 'servant David'. God's people would 'have one shepherd' and be keen to obey God's commandments. God would make an everlasting covenant with them and set his 'sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (Ezekiel 34:17–31, 37:24–28; cf. Isaiah 9:7, 16:5; Jeremiah 33:15ff; Zechariah 12:9–13:2).

This everlasting covenant is in accord with the covenants God made with Noah, Abraham and David – and his people (Genesis 9:16, 17:7–19; 2 Samuel 23:5; 1 Chronicles 16:17; Psalm 105:10). It is these covenants that had been broken but that God had promised to renew (Isaiah 24:5, 55:3, 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40, 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60; Malachi 3:1ff; Luke 22:20ff; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Hebrews 7–10).

The good news of great joy was that 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

The visitation of the angels and their message to the shepherds was not some abstract ideology or eternal concept. It was God's personal declaration that his promises and intentions were present in this child – in this one who was anointed by the Holy Spirit as Lord of God's creation to be its Saviour, and so bring all things to their intended fulfilment. This child would take away the sin of the world, defeat evil empires of darkness and bring 'life and immortality to light through the gospel' (John 1:29; Colossians 1:13; 2 Timothy 1:10).

The shepherds returned to shepherding, 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them', while Mary treasured all these things in her heart (Luke 2:16–20).

Our hope is sure because a child was born, and the angels sang. The shepherds witnessed the angelic multitude and the child with his parents. Jesus is 'the gate for the sheep'. He came as 'the good shepherd' to bring abundant life (John 10:7–16; cf. Hebrews 13:20, 21).

According to God's promises

Luke 2:25–40

God's favour

Luke wrote that John the Baptist was full of the Holy Spirit 'even before his birth'. His ministry was

to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:15–17; cf. Malachi 4:6).

This linking of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, reconciliation and forgiveness, and the reign of God through God's Messiah is consistent throughout the Gospel accounts and aligns with God's Old Testament covenant promises (cf. Luke 1:68–79).

The angel Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid because she had 'found favour with God' and would be the mother of a son who would forever inherit David's throne. She would call him Jesus and others would recognise his majesty and call him 'Son of the Most High' (Luke 1:30–34).

Gabriel's explanation of the way this would occur emphasised the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit and the 'power of the Most High' to Mary. Her son would be holy and declared to be God's Son because 'nothing will be impossible with God' (Luke 1:35–37)

Mary's response showed the same qualities the angel described concerning the fruits of John the Baptist's ministry. John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, was filled with the Holy Spirit at hearing Mary's news (Luke 1:35–41).

Mary's song powerfully and beautifully expressed these truths. She pre-empted and helped shape much of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' early preaching at Nazareth by praising God and declaring that God's mercy was for those in awe of God. Mary's worship proclaimed that God's strength dispersed and disrupted the intentions and actions of arrogant, powerful, greedy and wealthy people in favour of those who were humble, vulnerable, generous and resource-poor (Luke 1:46–55).²

The song of Zechariah also came from a heart 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Luke 1:67ff). God's presence with him revealed and confirmed rich truths to him during his months of silence.

² Luke's recording of Jesus' birth narrative profiled Jesus' home environment and the understandings of Israel's theological and cultural history that Mary would have shared with him. Jesus' gospel was informed and shaped by his mother's teaching as part of the divine revelation he received and shared (cf. 2 Timothy 3:14–17).

When Jesus was taken to the temple by his parents, Holy Spirit ‘rested on’ Simeon, ‘revealed’ God’s plan to him and ‘guided’ him into the temple to meet the boy Jesus. Simeon clearly knew the grace of God. Luke wrote that Simeon was ‘righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel’ (Luke 2:25–27). Simeon’s praising God and blessing of the new family showed profound insight into God’s purposes for his Son (Luke 2:34–35).

Anna’s prophetic testimony ‘to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’ was evidence of her worship and was doubtless also from the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:36–40).

God’s fullness

John the Baptist’s declaration that someone, more powerful than he was, would baptise with the ‘Holy Spirit and fire’ promised a ministry of the Holy Spirit beyond that seen even in these wonderful events surrounding Jesus’ birth. The angel Gabriel said Mary’s child would reign on David’s throne over the house of Jacob as ‘Son of the Most High’ (Luke 1:32). His reign would be without end. Mary understood this in terms of God’s mercy, as promised to Abraham, and thought of his reign by the holy sovereignty of God in terms of overthrowing the proud and powerful, exalting the humble and feeding of the hungry (Luke 1:46–56, cf. 4:16–30).

Zechariah spoke of a saviour who would redeem God’s people and rescue them from their enemies. His rule on David’s throne would fulfil the mercies promised in God’s holy covenant with Abraham. The ‘dawn from on high’ would bring righteousness, holiness and peace, with freedom from darkness and death. Simeon testified that this would come with great opposition and involve much suffering, including for Mary. The exposure of the inner thoughts of those who would fall from their prominence and of those who were suffering under them would be no small event.

The Spirit descended on Jesus ‘in bodily form like a dove’ and the Father declared his love for and delight in his Son so that these ministries would occur (Luke 3:16–22). Jesus’ anointing for ministry happened in the physical action of being baptised. Not only would his life be the fullness of the prophecies given to John, Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, *he* would be the one through whom and by whom this fullness would come to those who would receive him.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit described in these first chapters of Luke unveils the person and work of the Father and the Son. Jesus, in his humanity, was this Son. His sonship was more than the re-establishing of the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants and dynasties. He came to reveal his Father and the fullness God had planned for God’s whole family.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit to Jesus was so that Jesus would fulfil these covenants in his death and resurrection as Messiah. The temptations indicated

something of the battles that were ahead – particularly in his suffering and death – and pointed to the resurrection and ascension that would follow (Luke 4:1–13).

Jesus' ministry at Nazareth was a signpost to Pentecost, as was the story of the healing of the man with the unclean spirit that followed Jesus' home-town rejection (Luke 4:14ff). Throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel, the Holy Spirit filled Jesus, revealed the Father's will to him and led him as Messiah. The Holy Spirit did not act independently of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, but in and through him. Jesus did not do his own thing but established and achieved his reign by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Neither the Spirit nor Jesus acted unilaterally, but neither did they simply act together. Luke said much concerning the Father accomplishing God's will in the action of Jesus as Messiah and by the Spirit through the disciples (e.g. Luke 10:17–22).

Rise and walk

Luke 5:17–26, also Matthew 9:1–8 and Mark 2:1–12

His own town

The context of this healing is ‘his own town’ (Matthew 9:1), which was now Capernaum, where Jesus stayed after John was arrested (Matthew 4:12ff). Luke indicated that Jesus went to Capernaum after being rejected at Nazareth (Luke 4:14 and 31) where Jesus had declared that the ‘Spirit of the Lord’ had anointed him to bring good news to poor people, freedom to prisoners and healing from blindness – all part of a season of divine grace and blessing (Luke 4:16ff).

Matthew wrote that Jesus’ healing ministry in Capernaum and around the sea of Galilee was a fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy that ‘the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned’ (Matthew 4:13–25; cf. Isaiah 9:1ff).

The story of Jesus healing the paralytic occurred in this context. Indeed, Luke’s account is that while Jesus ‘was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal’ (Luke 5:17).

He saw their faith

The paralysed man was lowered down in front of Jesus after those with him had ‘dug through’ the roof above Jesus (Mark 2:2–4). No wonder we are told that ‘Jesus saw their faith’ (Mark 2:5; Matthew 9:2; Luke 5:20)!

What was Jesus teaching when this happened? We can assume that his message was consistent with the above passages in their Old Testament context. Isaiah had prophesied about the defeat of unwelcome warriors through the birth of a child-son who would have authority, bring peace and be known as ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:5–7).

This prince-king is described in the last chapters of Isaiah as exchanging ashes for crowns of beauty and replacing mourning and despair with anointings of joy and clothes of praise:

Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace [dishonour, confusion and humiliation] they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs (Isaiah 61:3, 7 NIV).

In what ways did Jesus respond to this interruption? Did he see it as a diversion or distraction? Or did he realise it was the very point of his message? Yes, and yes again, and even more: he saw their faith! Their faith was not, as Jesus saw it, merely focused on his power to heal, but on himself as king of God’s kingdom, as God’s Messiah who was heralding a new regime.

They were filled with awe

The link between forgiveness and healing may seem strange; but those present knew the teaching of Moses concerning God's covenant with his people. They knew God's promises concerning covenant-sin leading to covenant-sickness, and of covenant-grace leading to covenant-healing – and that these promises were national, as well as personal (cf. Exodus 15:26; Deuteronomy 28:58–63, cf. 32:39).

The Pharisees taught that only God could forgive, and that God's forgiveness was to be received via temple rituals. They therefore insisted that Jesus was not divine, and that was precisely what they were *not* hearing from Jesus! Jesus was God with them, as a man, precisely to forgive. Jesus recognised their logic that healing is of one dimension, and that forgiving is of another. He then declared that he would heal the paralytic as a sign that 'the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' (Luke 5:24; Matthew 9:6; Mark 2:10). No wonder that 'Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today"' (Luke 5:26). Matthew's testimony was that 'When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings' (Matthew 9:8).

The one who taught and healed that day at Capernaum was present to them as the one who would forgive and heal that man without himself undergoing decay. Paul later told those at Pisidian Antioch that although the Jewish leaders did not recognise Jesus as God's Messiah,

that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Paul went on to quote the warning in Habakkuk that scoffers should be careful when despising the work God was doing among them (Acts 13:38–41).

Jesus was the one who not only healed the paralytic and brought the reign of God to light in Israel in the first century; he is the one who will accomplish a work beyond all belief (Acts 13:29–31). Paul linked Jesus' resurrection with the forgiveness of sins and indicated that receiving forgiveness heralds an eternal future (Acts 13:42–52)!

Messenger of the covenant

Luke 7:18–35

Are you the one who is to come?

There must have been some uncertainty concerning Jesus' identity and ministry either on John's part or with his disciples. They may have been expecting Jesus to bring immediate judgements, as when James and John, Jesus' disciples, later asked Jesus about commanding 'fire to come down from heaven and consume' those who did not receive Jesus' messengers (Luke 9:51–56). They may have had in mind John the Baptist's mention of Old Testament prophecies relating to the day of the Lord (cf. Luke 3:7, 15–17).

Jesus' response to Peter's declaration that Jesus was God's Messiah was to speak about his own violent death and third-day resurrection (Luke 9:18–22). Jesus understood himself in terms of Isaiah 35 and 61 (cf. Luke 4:18ff). He added that those who were not offended by what he was doing would save their lives by losing them and that they would not 'taste death before they [saw] the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:23–27).

If John and his disciples did not understand Jesus, then Jesus' disciples and the crowd with them also did not understand John very well! Jesus asked them what they were looking for when they went to see John the Baptist in the wilderness. Jesus answered his own question by declaring that John the Baptist was in fact 'more than a prophet':

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he (Luke 7:24–28).

Paul later wrote against the immaturity of being 'tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming' (Ephesians 4:14). He also wrote against being seduced by wealth (1 Timothy 6:9–19).

John the Baptist, according to Jesus, was 'more than a prophet'; he was the 'messenger of the covenant' who would prepare people for the sudden coming of the 'Lord whom you seek' (Luke 7:26; Malachi 3:1ff; cf. Isaiah 40:1ff).

Malachi believed the impact of God's messenger and the God the messenger would announce would be immediately evident, especially since the 'LORD of hosts' was the one for whom the way was being prepared (Malachi 3:1, 2)! The descendants of Levi would be refined and purified with fire and soap on his arrival until they presented 'offerings to the LORD in righteousness' (Malachi 3:2–4). Judgement would be made against sorcerers, adulterers, false witnesses and those who oppress workers, orphans, widows and aliens – those 'who do not fear me' (Malachi 3:5).

This picture is repeated in Malachi 4:1–6 where we read that arrogant evildoers will be burnt as stubble and the ‘sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings’ on those ‘who revere my name’. The prophet’s final summary was of the coming of ‘Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD’, and of this Elijah removing the curse of fractured families from the land by reconciling parents and their children. Jesus saw himself coming with and imparting covenant blessings. Judgement would be experienced by those who rejected these blessings (Luke 7:23).

Wisdom’s children

Were those playing the flute for dancing, and those wailing or weeping, expecting John and Jesus to accept their agendas? Or was Jesus ‘playing the flute’ and John wailing, with people neither dancing nor weeping? Either way, wise people saw what God was doing, responded to his messengers and took no offence at him (Luke 7:23). They heard God sing God’s song, rather than trying to get God to listen to their self-derived music (cf. Zephaniah 3:17).

What were the main aspects of this waiting for the coming Messiah? Firstly, the ‘least in the kingdom of God’ would be greater than John, so suggesting the restoration of Israel and the ‘obedience of the peoples’ under Messiah (Luke 7:28; cf. Genesis 49:10). Secondly, the Holy Spirit would be poured out on humanity (Luke 7:29 refers to John’s baptism: see also Luke 3:15–22) and creation would be renewed (cf. Luke 7:21, 22). Thirdly, sins would be forgiven under a new covenant; a covenant linked with the ministry of God’s suffering servant and recognised by repentance (Luke 3:8, 7:29, 30, 36ff).

These aspects were to be heralded by a voice crying in the wilderness and meant the final doom and demise of all that opposed God’s purposes. Those who were unresponsive to invitations to dance or weep ‘like children sitting in the marketplace’ had different interpretations (Luke 7:32, 33). They wanted political renewal by opposing oppressive foreign powers. They preferred legalistic obedience to the law and forgiveness by sacrifices according to the strict maintenance at the temple of their religious infrastructure.

Matthew’s account of the passage in Luke 7 is followed by Jesus declaring woes upon the cities in which he had ministered, assessments which were in line with many of the expectations of John’s disciples. Matthew then recorded Jesus’ prayer of thanksgiving that Jesus’ communion with his Father would be revealed to ‘infants’ rather than to ‘the wise and intelligent’. Those who – in their weariness and with their heavy burdens – come to Jesus for rest, would find ‘my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:20–30). True wisdom, Luke recorded Jesus saying, ‘is vindicated by all her children’ (Luke 7:35), and this wisdom comes from being Jesus’ disciple and learning that Jesus was and is like his Father and the Holy Spirit – ‘gentle and humble in heart’ (Matthew 11:29, Luke 10:21).

Seeing the kingdom of God

Luke 9:18–45

But who do you say that I am?

Luke set his record of the transfiguration between the mission of the twelve and the mission of the seventy (Luke 9:1–10:24). The message of the kingdom of God was immediate and evident as it was proclaimed through words and actions. Jesus focused on explaining to them what this meant for him. He wanted them to understand his relationship with his Father and foretold his own suffering, death and resurrection.

When asked who he thought Jesus was, Peter declared him to be ‘the Messiah of God’ (Luke 9:20). Jesus identified himself as the Son of Man, and indicated that he ‘must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised’ (Luke 9:22).

In Daniel 7:9–14, the Ancient of Days gives a human being or son of man an everlasting ‘dominion and glory and kingship’ over all humanity. Jesus’ references to his and his disciples’ sufferings relate to the intense opposition that comes against his kingdom. Before the final judgement indicated in Daniel, the fourth beast ‘shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces’ (Daniel 7:23). An evil king would later blaspheme against the Most High and exhaust God’s holy ones by altering ‘the sacred seasons and the law’. This perverse ruler would have power over God’s people ‘for a time, two times, and half a time’ (Daniel 7:25).

However, God’s judgement would revoke his terrestrial and celestial empire and it would be destroyed in favour of ‘the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them’ (Daniel 7:26, 27).

The link between Jesus as Messiah and Daniel’s son of man is natural as both emerge triumphant. Jesus may also be identifying himself with the suffering servant Isaiah’s prophecies by referring to his death and resurrection. He is certainly providing background beyond that recorded in the book of Daniel.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that the glory that they expected to be his as Messiah and Son of Man would involve great suffering and violent death. He linked his disciples with his sufferings – they were to ‘take up their cross daily’ (Luke 9:23–25). These sufferings would result from the action of the kingdom and prepare for its fulfilment. The coming glory of the Son of Man – along with the destructive reign of the beast – makes gaining the whole world or saving one’s life a little futile!

Jesus explained that the Son of Man would come in ‘his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels’. He was implying that there was a link between the

saints in Daniel, his disciples, and others who would follow him. Similarly, the Ancient of Days is identified with his Father. To see this kingdom impact on people in their circumstances would be remarkable, and that is precisely what Jesus indicated was happening and would continue to happen until the final consummation of history (Luke 9:26, 27)!

Jesus went up on the mountain to pray

The transfiguration provides an immediate explanation of Jesus' statement that 'there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God' (Luke 9:27). We see the essence of the reign of God in the Father's reminder to Peter, James and John that Jesus is his beloved and chosen Son (cf. Luke 3:22). The revelation of the communion and action of the Father and Son was the subject of Jesus' rejoicing 'in the Holy Spirit' when the seventy returned with joy from their successful preaching and ministry trips (Luke 10:21–24).

Jesus' statement about seeing the kingdom of God points towards the final revelation of God's reign. The three disciples saw a foretaste of this second advent on the mountain (cf. Daniel 7). Peter later wrote that they

had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:16–18).

While the reign of God was seen in Jesus' messianic person and ministry, and in the travels of the twelve and the seventy, Moses and Elijah appearing 'in glory' and speaking with Jesus about 'his departure [*exodus*]', which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' displayed the essence of Jesus' messianic kingdom (Luke 9:31).

Having told his disciples that his sufferings must precede this final glory, their mind was still not on his or their sufferings. They therefore did not truly see his glory. They did not fully comprehend what he had explained just over a week earlier (Luke 9:28). They were not yet ready to see the glory of the reign of Jesus as Messiah-Christ in his death, resurrection and ascension.

Peter wanted to prolong the heavenly visitation. He was not thinking of an *exodus*. He wanted to build shelters or tabernacles and remain on the mountain. But the Tabernacle himself was standing there (cf. John 2:14–22; Matthew 21:12–16). Jesus was on a journey to the ends of the earth, and they were (and we are) to go with him (Matthew 28:18–20; cf. Isaiah 24:15, 41:1ff, 42:4ff, 49:1ff, 51:5, 60:9, 66:19). Jesus was Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23). Jesus Christ is the message and the means whereby the ends of the earth will hear the gospel proclaimed. The disciples were not to listen to their own ideas of structure and glory (e.g. Luke 9:46–50). They were to listen to God's Son – God's beloved and

chosen one (cf. Psalm 2, 110 and Isaiah 42). This was the essence of the Father's declaration about his Son.

Look at my son

Unsurprisingly, the disciples lacked the resources to heal this boy by their own power. Jesus had already explained to them: no cross, no glory; know the cross, know true glory. Jesus knew that these healings were impossible without his violent death. If God's Spirit was to be outpoured and God's reign was to be fully established then Satan must be disarmed and his works destroyed. Death needed to be defeated and sins forgiven for God's reign to come in its fullness.

The story about a desperate father and his downtrodden only son is a poignant picture that helps explain the two previous passages. Jesus not only healed the boy, rescuing him from Satan's false fatherhood, he 'gave him back to his father' (Luke 9:42). No wonder Father and Son were so determined about accomplishing Jesus' *exodus* at Jerusalem!

Luke reported that 'all were astounded at the greatness of God', yet Jesus firmly reminded his disciples about his future sufferings and betrayal:

Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands (Luke 9:43–45).

The communion of Jesus and his Father so evident in the references to prayer in Luke 9:18 and 9:28 is central to the reign of God. To see Jesus is to see the sovereign God. To listen to him and his Father is to learn of their reign.

To focus on our structures is to miss God's reign. If we misunderstand the true glory of God's kingdom, we, too, will inadequately meet the needs of other people. To see the glorified Son-Messiah is to see his sufferings. To enter his sufferings in following him is enter his glory. Just as he was transfigured that he might be disfigured, so that we who are disfigured might be transfigured, so we are not to remain transfigured on some mountain away from the needs of other people. To stay transfigured would be to avoid the life of God's kingdom and its true glory. Jesus shares his transfiguring glory and joy with those who know him and who participate in his messianic sufferings and ministry (Luke 10:21–24, Matthew 11:25–30).

Finding the Father

Luke 23:26–43

Father or fate?

Luke records what is usually considered Jesus' first of seven sayings from the cross: 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing'. The response of one of the two thieves crucified with him led Jesus to speak directly to him: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:34, 43). Reflections on Luke's account may focus on the thought that one of the thieves saw his condemnation as appropriate and responded to Jesus' prayer for his crucifiers to be forgiven. Other perspectives may focus on Jesus' reference to Paradise. It is worthwhile considering that this thief may have experienced significant social dislocation prior to, or during his criminal actions. He may have struggled with his family upbringing and his relationships with his parents (cf. Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2). We do not have any information about the strengths and weaknesses of his own family, but it is possible that Jesus praying to God as Father spoke deeply to him.

It may be helpful to link Jesus' prayer to God as his 'Father' with other Gospel passages. John wrote of Jesus seeing his crucifixion in connection with his Father's glory (John 12:27–29, 17:1–5; cf. Hebrews 2:9). In Jesus' prayer after the upper room discourse, Jesus indicated that he, as Son, reveals the Father, and that the cross was the Father's initiative and action (John 17:1–4). We know that Jesus' relationship with his Father angered the Jews at his trial (Luke 22:66–71; Matthew 26:57–66) and at the cross (Matthew 27:40, cf. the centurion in Matthew 27:54).

Many other passages mention Jesus' relationship with his Father, including Matthew 11:25–30, John 3:16, 33–35 and Luke 22:39–46.

'Forgive them' is something only God could do, and Jesus' deep cry for their forgiveness could only be evoked from him because of his relationship with his Father. This prayer was his positive response to the intense religious and political hatred that was being directed to him. His prayer was consistent with Israel's record of God's action throughout their history (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 7; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Psalms 103, 130).

It took a whole cross to deal with sin. Jesus, in identifying with guilty humanity, opened himself to that suffering without which forgiveness would not be declared and the gulf between God and humanity would remain unhealed.

Jesus' declaration that 'they do not know what they are doing' was a reminder of the deceit of sin (Genesis 3:4; Hebrews 3:12, 13; Ecclesiastes 8:11; Romans 1:18ff). The narrative indicates that, while they knew they were crucifying someone the people regarded as significant, they did not know who they were crucifying (cf. Acts 3:17; 1 Corinthians 2:8). From a justice perspective, ignorance

is no plea, making Jesus' prayer even more significant (cf. Acts 3:17–23, 17:30). Sin and evil are ultimately against God because they are an affront to God's goodness, holiness and love through their impact on everyone and everything God has created (cf. Psalm 51:4, 100:3).

This saying from the cross does not expose our sins so much as proclaim their forgiveness and reveal the love that 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Corinthians 13:7). We cannot face our sins, and their impact on ourselves and others, apart from through their forgiveness (1 Peter 2:24; 2 Corinthians 5:14–21; Colossians 2:13–15).

Theft or gift?

Theft is anti-authority behaviour, as it assumes one's needs, entitlements and expectations outweigh any provisions, privileges or permissions that might already be in place. This kind of unilateral action is like Adam and Eve's, and like that referred to at the other end of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:1–6).

One psalmist suggested we are dislocated and awry by choice and not design, placing responsibility upon each one of us for our actions (Psalm 58:3; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9ff; Ephesians 4:25–28). So, why did this thief change his mind? Matthew identified him with those who mocked and ridiculed Jesus before

darkness came over the whole land [from noon] until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:44–49).

Luke identified the thief's change of mind and heart with Jesus' prayer to his Father for those who were acting against him to be forgiven of their high-handed ignorance.

Paul pointed out that repentance flows from, and is, a revelation of God's kindness (Titus 3:4; Romans 2:4). Crucified next to this thief was the love that bore all sin to total defeat and extinction, the holiness that washed clean, the truth that reversed lies and deceit, and the goodness that purged evil (cf. 1 Peter 3:18). The revelation that impacted this thief is seen in his own words:

- He feared God, which is the beginning and essence of true wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; Psalm 130:4).
- He accepted the judgement upon him (cf. the prodigal son in Luke 15:19 and the tax collector in Luke 18:13).
- He saw Jesus as innocent, and requested that, in Jesus, he 'might become the righteousness of God', to use Paul's expression (2 Corinthians 5:21). 'Remember me' has the thought of putting in a good word for someone, of advocating, interceding and intervening for someone in need.

He therefore saw something of the reality of the Son of God interceding, intervening, mediating and suffering for humanity, and wanted to be included and identified in that action (cf. Isaiah 59:1, 9–16; Romans 8:28ff; Revelation 5:1ff). As best he could grasp it in his dying agony, something of the essence of the kingdom of God as a realm of reconciliation and forgiveness came to him (cf. Revelation 19 to 22).

Rejection or acceptance?

Jesus' response was clear and unequivocal:

- Jesus began his response by emphasising the significance of what he was about to say. 'Truly' conveyed a sense that there was no basis of doubt in what was about to be spoken.
- Jesus indicated that there would be no delay and that the thief would have a positive answer to his request that very day. This immediacy was naturally significant to a dying criminal wanting release from guilt and pain (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17, 6:2; Hebrews 4:1ff).
- Jesus assured him that he would not be alone or forgotten but would be remembered by Jesus: he would be 'with me', and so he would also be with those who were to be with Jesus in his resurrection and ascension (cf. Hebrews 12:2).
- Jesus promised him a new location: 'Paradise' would be the new Eden, the new garden, replacing Golgotha, the barren place of skulls and death. The cross would be a 'tree of life' and not a tree of death (cf. Revelation 22:1–4, 14–15, 2:7).

Jesus's words to this thief are consistent with his message about the defeat of the thief in John 10:1–17 (cf. Luke 15:11–32, 18:10–14). We too can hear the Son's cry and respond with the thief, as did Paul:

it is no longer I who live, but 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 2:20).

The thief found community. He found family. He came home to God the Father, Son and Spirit (cf. Hebrews 2:10–13; 1 John 3:1–3). Being God's children is not perpetual childishness; it is full maturity (1 Corinthians 13:11–13; 1 Corinthians 2:6; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28, 4:12; Hebrews 5:14, 6:1; James 1:4).

The resurrection of Jesus

Luke 24:1–35

An idle tale?

The women who had been with Jesus followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb where Joseph placed Jesus' body, and they 'saw the tomb and how his body was laid'. They 'prepared spices and ointments' on returning from the tomb (Luke 23:55, 56). Their faith was strong enough that they could keep the sabbath even when Jesus had died. When the women came back to the tomb at early dawn 'on the first day of the week' with the spices they had prepared, they were 'perplexed' because the stone was rolled away and there was no body (Luke 24:1–4).

After the 'two men in dazzling clothes' asked them why there were 'seeking the living among the dead' when Jesus had risen just as he had told them, the women returned to the apostles to tell them the good news. But the apostles did not believe them. It seemed to be just an 'idle tale' until Peter saw for himself what had happened (Luke 24:4–12).

Jesus, while walking with two disciples towards Emmaus after his resurrection, rebuked them for being 'slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared'. He asked them whether his sufferings and the glory he was about to enter were essential to his messianic identity and calling, and then answered his own question by interpreting the revelations regarding himself that saturated their Scriptures (Luke 24:25–27).

Later, Jesus stood among the twelve, affirmed that he had 'flesh and bones', and showed them 'his hands and his feet' (Luke 24:36–40; cf. John 20:26–29). After eating a piece of fish, he again emphasised that all that was written about him in their Scriptures would be fulfilled. He explained that his suffering, death and resurrection enabled the proclamation of 'repentance and forgiveness of sins' to every nation. They had witnessed 'these things' *and* would receive his Father's promise gift of 'power from on high' – of God's Holy Spirit (Luke 24:44–49).

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he had told them the details of the most significant revelations he had received:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4).

Although their Scriptures did not explicitly state that Jesus would rise from the dead, Jesus urged them to believe its messages about him (Luke 24:25–27). His resurrection was to be understood from the total prophetic testimony and not just by using selections from it. Jesus was presenting himself as the divine Son who fulfilled (and fulfils) the royal messianic priest descriptions of Psalms 2, 89 and 110 (c.f. Psalm 16). He identified himself as the significant human person or son

of man in Daniel 7, the suffering servant in Isaiah 40ff and the righteous Branch in Jeremiah and Zechariah.

Jesus summarised the Scriptures concerning himself under two headings: his sufferings and his glory. In explaining their sacred writings to his disciples, he clarified his coming and ministry, his death and resurrection, his presence personally with them after his resurrection and before his ascension, and his ongoing presence with them in and through the giving of the Holy Spirit.

God was one with his people from the beginning of their story. He tabernacled with them, his presence went with them, and he achieved deliverance from among them (e.g. Genesis 3:15; Exodus 32–34; Isaiah 59:16). God saved his people by being with them, and not by an external act remotely imputed to or on them. They were therefore empowered to believe that Messiah would rise from the dead, and that in him the dead would be raised to everlasting life.

The resurrection of the dead

The Pharisees in Jesus' day believed in the resurrection of the dead despite the seeming lack of many explicit references to resurrection in their Scriptures – although Daniel was given an indication about the dead awakening (Daniel 12:1–3; cf. Matthew 22:31, 32). There are at least three reasons for this:

- Israel's establishment and survival has resurrection themes. For example, Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers and became a ruler in Egypt after being wrongly imprisoned. When reconciled with his family he said: 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today' (Genesis 50:20). The book of Joshua ends mentioning Joseph's bones being taken to Israel from Egypt (Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32). The return of the nation after the Babylonian exile also has strong resurrection overtones (e.g. Ezekiel 37:1ff).
- Israel existed as the result of God's provision to Abraham (Genesis 22:13; cf. Hebrews 11:19). No conscience could be cleansed under the Mosaic covenant other than in the context of the sacrifices and worship given by God. Deliverance from the death that comes from sin was promised through sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11).
- Israel's return to the promised land from Egypt and Babylon pointed to the re-establishment of Eden and to the fulfilment of God's original creational purpose in and by his steadfast love and faithfulness (Isaiah 51:3; Ezekiel 36:35; cf. Hebrews 11:10, 26, 12:22ff). Eden could only be entered after the failure of the first couple by being raised from the dead (Genesis 2:17, 3:1–5, 22–24; Revelation 20:1–15).

Our lives may bear similar testimonies. There are many valleys of 'the shadow of death' through which we pass, and many times that God's grace and mercy restore

us. God abundantly encourages us that we ‘will dwell in the house of the Lord forever’ (Psalm 23). Unlike Israel, we know Jesus rose and ascended to the right hand of God (Mark 14:62, 16:19; Acts 2:25–36; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2).

Jesus rose, as he said

Jesus’ resurrection declared him Lord of the living and the dead, and the resurrection and the life. He conquered death and removed any basis for our separation from God’s love. Jesus Christ is the second Adam whose victory ensures that the dead are raised, and so that this perishable, mortal body will be raised to be imperishable and immortal (Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:51–57; Romans 8:31–39; 2 Timothy 1:8–10; Revelation 1:4ff, 17–20)

While we await our own resurrection and for this fullness to occur at Jesus’ second coming, we have already received a foretaste and guarantee of what God has promised. We see our resurrection by faith, just as Israel waited for their Messiah by faith. We now owe nothing to our flesh with its inevitable decay; the Spirit of Christ now witnesses to us concerning our new life in the family of God (Romans 8:10–17).

The promise of the Father

Luke 24:36–52

Jesus filled with the power of the Holy Spirit

The promise of the Father referred to in Luke 24:44–49, Acts 1:4 and Acts 2:33 is for those who believe in Jesus as Messiah, Saviour and Lord (cf. John 3:34–36, 14:15ff, 16:7ff, 20:19ff). Firstly, though, it is the Father's promise to Jesus. He is the Spirit anointed Messiah-Christ through whom, as resurrected and ascended Lord, the Holy Spirit is given in fullness.

John the Baptist was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' and would make the people ready for the Lord with 'the spirit and power of Elijah' (Luke 1:15, 17, cf. 1:41, 67, 80). The angel's message to Mary was that her son would be known as God's Son and be born because of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit and the Most High (Luke 1:35, cf. 1:47, 2:25–27).

John the Baptist made his view of any comparison between Jesus and himself quite clear: 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire'. John's testimony was confirmed by the Father at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:16–22).

Jesus was 'full of the Holy Spirit' when he 'was led by the Spirit in the wilderness' after his baptism and began his ministry 'filled with the power of the Holy Spirit'. Luke linked this fullness to the proclamation and ministry that Jesus was undertaking (Luke 4:1, 14, 18).

When the seventy appointed by Jesus to proclaim the kingdom of God returned full of joy, Jesus 'rejoiced in the Holy Spirit' and thanked his Father as 'Lord of heaven and earth' for revealing the reign of God to young children while not disclosing it to those famed for their wisdom and intelligence. Jesus also thanked his heavenly Father for delegating everything to him and for their unique relationship which enabled Jesus to reveal to those Jesus chose who God is and the way God reigns (Luke 10:21, 22).

Luke's emphasis then shifted to Jesus' teaching about the significance of this ministry of the Holy Spirit. Luke nominated three themes. God, as heavenly Father, would 'give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:13). Secondly, forgiveness was available for those who spoke against Jesus, but not for anyone blaspheming God's Holy Spirit (Luke 12:10). Lastly, the Holy Spirit would assist Jesus' disciples in responding to rulers who wrongly arrested them (Luke 12:12).

See, it's me!

Jesus' death and resurrection did not diminish his being full of the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared not as a ghost – if anything,

he was more substantial than this physical world (cf. John 20:19)! This makes Jesus' post-resurrection messages that repentance and forgiveness would be proclaimed after Messiah was killed and then raised to life again even more powerful. This resurrection reality included the fulfillment of his Father's promises to him and to God's people. Their lives among other nations and their ministry to these nations would be with God's power (Luke 24:44–49).

To be blessed in receiving 'what my Father promised' from Jesus as Messiah, Christ, and Anointed One after his resurrection, and just prior to his ascension, filled his disciples with 'great joy' (Luke 24:50–52).

Luke re-stated this connection between the gift of the Spirit and the presence of the resurrected Messiah at the beginning of the book of Acts. Jesus ascended 'after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen'. These instructions related to the reign of God among them and through them, to them receiving 'the promise of his Father' and to his baptising them with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:3–5).

When the disciples questioned Jesus further, he repeated his promise about the Father's promise, emphasising that while the timing of what his Father was doing was not being disclosed to them, they would witness to him from where they were 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7, 8).

Peter's proclamation on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was Messiah began with Joel's prophecy that in the last days God's Spirit would be poured out on men and women, and that salvation was for everyone who called on the Lord's name. Peter declared that Jesus had been exalted as Lord over death, and that, as such, Jesus had 'received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:14–36).

Those present responded to Peter preaching forgiveness, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' exaltation as Messiah and Lord by welcoming his message, being baptised and devoting 'themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 1:41, 42).

The Father's promise, Messiah's reign, and the Spirit's coming

The three references by Luke to the promise of the Father indicate that the promise was given by the Father to Jesus as Messiah-Christ

- for him to know the ongoing fullness and power of the Holy Spirit in his humanity. This fullness had been testified to at his baptism and transfiguration, and throughout his ministry, but was now known as resurrected Lord – untouched by the decay and doom of death.
- for his reign as the Lord of the Spirit, and in the Spirit as sovereign not only over his willing people, but over all humanity – and all creation.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

- to bring repentant, redeemed, renewed humanity to his fullness of life in the Holy Spirit – and so flow through them to the ends of the earth where, according to Isaiah, the coastlands wait for his teaching.

The promise of the Father to the Son becomes the promise of the Son in the Spirit to those who believe, and, through us, the promise of the Father and Son by the Holy Spirit that all can hear the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. The Son knew God's promise from birth to burial, and now, as Lord, knows this promise not only in the Spirit's ongoing presence, but in his outpouring of the Spirit to bring mercy, grace, goodness, righteousness, truth, holiness and love to humanity. We exalt Jesus as Messiah and Christ, as Lord of all, and as the one whom the Father raised from the dead and anointed to sit at his right hand to subdue all his enemies by the riches that come from the Spirit's outpouring on us and all creation.

It was his Father who has initiated all this according to his plans and purposes (Acts 1:7). The impact of God's reign was powerfully present. God is one God, as Father, Son and Spirit, and was inviting all humanity to participate in God's re-creational actions.

Having explained his relationship with his Father as he was overflowing with the Holy Spirit's joy, Jesus invited those who were listening to come to him:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:25–30).

The book of Revelation concludes with the invitation of the Holy Spirit and the bride for everyone to come and to invite other people to come with them:

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift (Revelation 22:17).

The new community

Acts 2:29–47

By the river Jordan

John the Baptist started preaching by the river Jordan about three years before Pentecost. He was known as

the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”” (Matthew 3:1ff; Mark 1:1ff; Luke 3:1ff; John 1:15ff).

By standing at and in the river, he reminded the people of the way God used Moses and Joshua to bring their ancestors out of Egypt and, after forty years in the wilderness, into the promised land.

Many of those who heard John preach would have recalled Elijah – with whom John was compared – crossing the river with his successor, Elisha, before being taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). The people expected Messiah to come after a second Elijah (Matthew 11:11–14, 17:1–13; Luke 1:17; cf. John 1:21, 25). John’s preaching resulted in him baptising many people. His message had several key themes:

- As God’s kingdom was nearby in time and place, there was an urgent need to be ready for the arrival of this kingdom’s ruler, the Messiah or Christ. His imminent appearing called for changed minds and hearts, leading God’s people to live according to God’s way of doing things.
- This coming Messiah would not only rule God’s kingdom; he was to be ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). The people’s acts of confession as they were baptised by John were linked with their changed attitudes and actions.
- Messiah would baptise not only with water but with the Holy Spirit. His ministry would grow, and John’s ministry would reduce. When Jesus came for baptism, John nominated him as this king, this Lamb and this Messiah, Christ and Anointed One.

Jesus went about his ministry with these themes in mind. He acted as king of the kingdom by casting out evil spirits and confronting the ruling elite around him, and by declaring himself as God’s servant (e.g. Mark 9:35, 10:42–45). In forgiving sins, he was presenting himself as the one by whom they could know forgiveness (e.g. Mark 10:42–45; John 10:10ff). He was the one who, having come in and by the Holy Spirit, and who lived in and by the Holy Spirit, would send the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:14ff, 11:13ff; Matthew 12:28ff; John 14:15ff).

On the day of Pentecost

Peter and those who believed his message became the new community of God at Pentecost. Luke described them as being in God's kingdom and living under the lordship of Jesus the Messiah (Acts 2:29–36). He wrote of their sins having been forgiven, of their being baptised into a new community formed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37–41), and of their being filled with the Holy Spirit by Jesus baptising them with the Spirit (Acts 2:33–38).

The death and resurrection of Jesus was central to the events that happened on the day of Pentecost. He had died to 'take away the sins of the world' (John 1:29). It was 'this Jesus whom you crucified' to whom they were to look for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:36ff). God raised Jesus from the dead, even to his 'right hand' in heaven from where he now defeats those who oppose him and his purposes (Acts 2:29–36; cf. Mark 10:42–45). Having risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, Jesus had 'received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit'. It was the fruit of that promise that was evident to all (Acts 2:33–38).

Peter told those present that 'the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him' (Acts 2:39). Consequently, we receive

- deliverance from the powers of darkness and the domination of corrupt human and spiritual rulers.
- forgiveness of our sins, of which even the smallest lapse is an offence to the holy and loving God who created and now redeems this world in which humanity commits so much evil.
- fullness from and of God's Spirit, leading us to live in the richness of God's goodness and mercy, and delighting to be as he wants us to be and to do what he wants us to do.

These three themes are all the one action of one God in and through his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, by his Holy Spirit. As Messiah, Jesus is Prophet, Priest and King:

- to be in God's kingdom is to be forgiven and baptised in the Spirit.
- to be forgiven is to receive the Spirit's fullness and enter God's kingdom.
- to be baptised in the Spirit is to enter God's kingdom as forgiven people.

Throughout creation

God is acting to bring all humanity to acknowledge his glory in Jesus as Lord, Forgiver, and Messiah. All creation will be renewed in this glory, and in this new creation the new community formed at Pentecost which seems so feeble in this world will be full of this glory and at home forever with God.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Death will have gone, Satan will be defeated, and we will live in the kingdom of God in all its fullness without being dominated by the corruption of this world's systems. Sin and evil will be forever behind us, the delight of Paradise will be revealed, and we, like the thief crucified with Jesus, will be with God and like God (cf. Gen 3:8). This richness will be intimately shared between those who live in that new Eden. The fruit of the Spirit will be in full harvest, bringing abundant life to everyone. The most wonderful experiences of God in this life are but intimations of this eternal destiny (Galatians 5:22ff, 6:15; 1 Corinthians 2:9ff; 1 John 3:1ff).

No wonder those who were the new community at Pentecost 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers', experienced 'awe [come] upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles', 'were together and had all things in common', 'spent much time together in the temple, [and] broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people' and had 'the Lord [add] to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 2:42ff).

Peter heals a man who could not walk

Acts 3:1–4:22

Who was this man?

We know he was lame from birth (Acts 3:2), that people took him daily to the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:3), that he was well known to the worshippers at the temple (Acts 3:10, 16), that he asked for alms (Acts 3:3), and that he was more than forty years old (Acts 4:22).

We don't know what he knew directly or had heard about Jesus. We don't know what he knew of Jesus' life and healing ministry. Did he know the story of the man born blind (John 9:1ff)? Did he know of Jesus' teaching in the temple about 'rivers of living water' (John 7:37–39)? Did he know of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the temple and his teaching immediately prior to his arrest (Matt. 21:14, 23:37–24:2)? Had he heard about Jesus' trial and death, of Barabbas being released rather than Jesus (Acts 3:14)? Had he been told about Jesus' resurrection and the return of the disciples to Jerusalem (Acts 1:12)?

We also don't know what he knew about the forming of the church. Did he know of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and Peter's proclamation to those gathered (Acts 2:1–40)? Had he heard of the many signs and wonders done by the apostles, the distribution of goods to the poor, and the goodwill of the people towards the new community (Acts 2:43–45, 4:32–37)? Was he aware that many people were being saved and that they were spending considerable time in the temple (Acts 2:41, 47)?

It seems reasonable to conclude that he knew of some of these things. He had a social support group and was well known to other people: he was lame, not blind, deaf or unable to speak, and what happened to Jesus and the forming of the church hardly happened quietly in a corner!

We read further on in Luke's second book that 'many signs and wonders' were 'done among the people through the apostles and that they were together in Solomon's Portico' (Acts 5:12–16). These events included healings and exorcisms, suggesting that Solomon's Portico was a well-known meeting place of these first Christians, though the location of the Beautiful Gate is debated.

What was he given?

Peter and John's intent look at him, and their request that he look at them when asking for alms (cash) is revealing. The unspoken communication must have been mutually penetrating since he 'fixed his attention' on Peter and John.

The healing of this man was beyond what he expected: he had simply asked for some money. His response to his healing was clear: 'Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and

praising God' and 'he clung to Peter and John' (Acts 3:8–11). When Peter and John were brought before the religious leaders the next day after being imprisoned overnight, the healed man was 'standing beside them' (Acts 4:14).

Peter's response to the man was that his healing was not the result of his and John's power or piety as they lacked silver or gold (Acts 3:6, 12). Peter pointed out that his and John's action was 'in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth', the true treasure, who was worth more than any amount of money, and that he was healed 'by faith in [Jesus'] name', by 'the faith that is through Jesus' (Acts 3:6, 16).

Who is this Jesus?

The healing depended on the name of Jesus. The man was told to stand up and walk 'in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth' (Acts 3:6). Peter told the crowd that the man's healing was 'by faith in his name' and that 'his name itself has made this man strong' (Acts 3:16).

Appearing before the religious leaders, Peter and John were asked 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' (Acts 4:7). Peter's response was that the 'stone' the leaders rejected had 'become the cornerstone' and that humanity had received 'no other name' that could rescue them (Acts 4:10–12).

The significance of the name is seen again when the leaders warned and ordered them not to speak or teach to anyone again in Jesus' name (Acts 4:17, 18). The prayer of the believing community repeated this emphasis on Jesus' name (Acts 4:29, 30).

It is worth asking what is this name? Who is this Jesus? He is the servant of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Acts 3:13). He is the holy and righteous one the people rejected (Acts 3:14). He is the author of life (Acts 3:14). He is the Messiah prophesied by Moses, Samuel and the prophets (Acts 3:18–24, 4:26), and the cornerstone which the builders rejected (Acts 4:11).

He acts by healing (Acts 3:7, 16, 4:9, 22, 30), by giving times of refreshing (Acts 3:19), by protecting people from trouble and by giving the blessings God has promised (Acts 3:23). He turns people from wickedness (Acts 3:26) and brings praises to God (Acts 3:8, 4:21, 24). He gives great grace, fills people with the Spirit, enables bold proclamation, and performs signs and wonders (Acts 4:20, 29–33). It is through him alone that we are saved (Acts 4:12), have faith (Acts 4:4), and will be raised from the dead (Acts 3:15, 4:2). In short, he was anointed to do whatever God had planned to happen (Acts 4:28).

Philip and the Ethiopian

Acts 8:26–40

The sovereign Spirit

The references to ‘an angel of the Lord’ and to ‘the Spirit’ are reminders of other significant events in this early history of the Christian church (Acts 8:26, 29, 39). Cornelius met Peter after Cornelius ‘saw an angel of God’ and Peter had a vision and heard a voice (Acts 10:1–18). Peter attributed the voice to the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God (Acts 10:14, 19, 28).

Paul’s vision of the man from Macedonia comes after Paul and his companions were ‘forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia’, and after the ‘Spirit of Jesus did not allow them’ to enter Bithynia (Acts 16:1–15).

God’s concern has always been with the nations – including Africa and Europe, which link with these stories! Abraham was told that by his seed ‘all the nations would be blessed’. He was chosen to be the ‘father of many nations’ after Noah and Babel (Genesis 12:1–3, 15:1–6; Romans 4:17, 18).

Jesus assured his disciples that he would be with them in their mission to make disciples of, to baptise, and to teach the nations in ‘the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:16–20). Just as the Spirit ‘moved over the face of the deep’, the Spirit was ‘poured out on all flesh’ at Pentecost to reverse Babel-like behaviour (Genesis 1:2; Acts 2:1ff, 17ff).

While we know little of the background of the Queen of Sheba, and whether her realm was Ethiopia, it seems there may well have been a Jewish enclave of proselytes or Jews-by-birth at the Ethiopian palace in the time of this story. Certainly, this man had visited Jerusalem ‘to worship’ at a festival and was eager to read the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 8:27, 28).

The witness of the word of God

Luke’s description of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian official is precise and graphic. Philip was told by an angel to get up, and so Philip ‘got up and went’. On arriving near the chariot in which the official was riding, the Holy Spirit told Philip to approach the chariot and link with this official, who was reading aloud from Isaiah (Acts 8:26–30).

Philip’s question to him about whether he understood what he was reading was an excellent one! And the answer given by the official as he invited Philip to join him in the chariot was of the same quality: ‘How can I, unless someone guides me’ (Acts 8:30, 31)?

Paul addresses this same question in Romans 10. Paul argued that when the word of faith in Jesus as Lord is proclaimed, God saves and justifies (meaning that God makes righteous, as Paul explained in connection with Abraham in Romans 4).

Paul reminded his Roman readers of the passage which declared that those who believe in God will never be ashamed in God's presence (Romans 10:11; Isaiah 28:16³). Paul's message that the same Lord is Lord of Jews and Gentiles, and that this Lord richly blesses everyone who calls on him for salvation, used the same quote from Joel 2:32 that Peter used on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21).

Paul then argued that, for the word of God to be heard and believed in, with people calling on 'the name of the Lord', the preacher needed to be sent. Being sent, Paul asserted, is 'beautiful', even though painful (Romans 10:15, 16; cf. Isaiah 52:7). Paul quoted from Isaiah 53 to say that, although not all Israel had believed, faith came and comes from what people hear of and from God, and this message of good news reaches them 'through the word of Christ' (Romans 10:17). He emphasised that the word of God has 'gone to the ends of the earth', and that, although Israel was 'disobedient and contrary', this creative and redemptive word is heard by those who were not even listening or looking (Romans 10:18–21, cf. 1:18ff, 2:1–16).

An Ethiopian tradition states that this official was their first evangelist. The official's response to Philip's teaching clearly reveals his willingness to be identified with Jesus and those who followed the way Jesus lived, taught and died. Philip's response was to identify with the official by entering a water-source with him and baptising him (Acts 8:36–38).⁴

The cruciality of the cross

What message did Philip proclaim?

Then Philip [started] with this scripture [and] proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:29–35; cf. Isaiah 53:7ff).

Using Paul's language, 'the good news about Jesus' is the word of salvation, the message of justification and righteousness by faith in Jesus, and not by works. Philip would have discussed the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of 'one crying in the wilderness' (Isaiah 40:1ff). No wonder the Ethiopian official, having been to Jerusalem to worship, wanted to be washed!

The Ethiopian official's question as to whether the prophet was speaking 'about himself or about someone else' was also instructive (Acts 8:34). The prophet may well have been speaking not only of any particular suffering servant, but of those

³ One who trusts will not panic (NRSV); the one who trusts will never be dismayed (NIV); He who believes in it will not be disturbed (NASB); Whoever believes will not be in haste (ESV).

⁴ The idea of *joining* occurs at least three times in this story. Philip was told to join the chariot, the official asked Philip to get in the chariot and to sit next to him and the two men both entered the water.

faithful in Israel as a suffering servant. Philip explained that Jesus correlates with this prophecy (cf. Acts 2:22ff, 3:12ff, 4:8ff, 4:24ff).

The 'good news about Jesus', signified by baptism, is that, in the mystery of God's grace, Jesus' life was taken from him, and now death will be taken from us. Philip would have made it clear that Jesus was deprived of justice and that everyone could now receive justification and forgiveness from him. Whatever is understood by the term 'perversion of justice', Isaiah's explanation can help when considering Philip's answer to the Ethiopian official (Isaiah 53:8–12).

If the prophet was speaking prophetically of Jesus' death and resurrection, then Jesus has been given a portion with the great. He now divides the victory spoils, having poured out his life in death while being counted with the transgressors! The 'good news about Jesus', using Isaiah's servant description, is that he was numbered with us in our unrighteousness in order that we would be counted with him in his righteousness. And that those identified with him would be a multitude from every nation, language tribe and tongue that no-one could count (cf. Isaiah 41:1ff, 42:4ff, 49:1, 51:5, 59:18, 60:9, 66:19).

The inheritance of grace (Part 1)⁵

Acts 20:32

The word of his grace

Luke recorded Paul's final conversation with the Ephesian church's elders prior to Paul leaving Ephesus, including his declaration that he was commending them to God and to the good news of God's grace which Paul believed could strengthen and grow them in the present while providing them with an 'inheritance among all who are sanctified' (Acts 20:32).

Reflecting on the last words of Paul to the Ephesian elders reveals the nature of his ministry to them with much humility, numerous tears and many trials (Acts 20:19). We learn of him proclaiming and teaching this message to them publicly and in their homes, witnessing 'to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus' (Acts 20:20).

Paul believed he had testified 'to the good news of God's grace', had gone 'about proclaiming the kingdom' and that he 'did not shrink from declaring ... the whole purpose of God'. He urged the elders to keep watch 'over all the flock' and to be concerned about false shepherds and 'savage wolves'. He may have been thinking of Bethlehem's shepherds some years earlier! After considering everything that had occurred during his time in Ephesus, he reminded them they were 'to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son'. Their role was significant as the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Acts 20:24–28).

Paul made two final statements to the elders at Ephesus. In the first one, he commended and committed them to God and the word or message of God's grace. In the second statement, Paul affirmed his apostolic integrity by describing his Christ-like lifestyle.

In his letter to the Ephesian Christians, Paul gave thanks for them, and asked God – the glorious Father (*or* the Father of glory) – to bring them to know God as Father more fully. This knowledge would come as the Holy Spirit revealed God's wisdom to them (Ephesians 1:15ff). In Ephesians 1:1–10, Paul explained that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has

- blessed us in Jesus Christ in the 'heavenly places' with 'every spiritual blessing'. These riches are the fullness of the God's relationship with his Son, from eternity and seen in history in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit who secures 'our inheritance'.
- elected us in Jesus Christ to be pure and holy in God's presence, and to share in this triune, divine communion.

⁵ These notes and the next one on *More blessed to give than to receive* form a two-part series.

- destined us to be God's family, adopted in love 'according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'.
- shown us the divine mystery in this relational intimacy as God's plan to unify all creation in Jesus Christ so that when the times are complete all will be gathered into one community in Christ.

Each of these divine actions is parallel and equivalent and provides different perspectives on one action, that of Christ's person and work. They are all the unrestrained outpouring of God's own self, determined by God's own nature – by God's wisdom and insight – and hence by God's goal for creation. They are all revelations of God's grace, of God's redemption of us to bring us together in and with him, forever.

Paul was acknowledging to the Ephesian elders that his eldership over them would no longer function as it had operated. He knew he would not see them again, and that the Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships were facing him wherever he went. Paul wanted the Ephesian elders to know they were not on their own; God himself would oversee them, even in the face of the great difficulties that were ahead of them.

Paul does not act this way simply to formalise his departure from them. He had a stronger reason. He longed for the fruit of being committed to God and the word of God's grace to be realised. He saw the building up of the Ephesian believers and the giving to them of an inheritance as two aspects, both of which were community events 'among all who are sanctified' (Acts 20:32).

Equipping and building up

Paul wrote to them that the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ was 'in order to fill the whole universe' (Ephesians 4:10 NIV). This filling occurs through the church as Jesus gives people their ministries. These apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers were to enable God's people to do those acts of ministry that would strengthen and enrich them so that they would reach the

unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ (Ephesians 4:12, 13).

This maturity comes to the body of Christ as we

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Ephesians 4:15, 16).

This action is the completion of a circular flow: from the Father to Christ to us through his body and returning to God. This process and its outcome are the

Father's glory and the mystery of Christ. They enable our access to the Father, create our life in the Spirit, and ensure our growing 'in every way into' Christ and result in our being 'filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 4:15, 3:19). This fullness comes by our belonging to the community of God's people, the 'holy temple in the Lord', God's dwelling place as Father, Son and Spirit (Ephesians 2:21).

To speak 'the truth in love' is to share the Father's blessings in Christ with each other (Ephesians 4:15). This is 'what he has made us' for, which he planned 'before the foundation of world' (Ephesians 2:10, 1:4).

Giving an inheritance

Paul wrote to the Ephesians of being chosen in Christ to obtain an inheritance (Ephesians 1:11–22). This heritage of grace was their predetermined divine destiny in Christ. The Father's lavish and free giving related not only to the revelation of his grace, but to the certainty of God achieving his goal in and by his grace. They received an inheritance, not from, or by, or for themselves, but in order that they become his heritage, so that he achieves his plan to reveal himself in and through creation's redeemed family. As heirs of the Father, in Christ, they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise 'as a pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory' (Ephesians 1:14). The presence of the Holy Spirit to us is both the Father's indication to us of, and his means of ensuring our inheritance as his people.

Paul's understanding of inheritance in this epistle appears to come from Psalm 2:8. The Father's 'glorious inheritance' is in his giving the nations to his Son, and in God's people taking refuge and reaching maturity in him (Ephesians 1:18). Our inheritance is all that God gives us in Christ, namely himself and all that he has made. Our inheritance is God – Father, Son and Spirit – in all fullness (Ephesians 1:23, 2:22, 3:19). The kingdom of Christ and of his Father is a kingdom of love, and it is this love that overwhelms angry empires.

For Christ to have the nations as his heritage is for the nations to be under his rule and to receive his fullness. Life in his kingdom is being filled with his Spirit. Receiving this inheritance excludes the 'death-style' of the world (Ephesians 2:1ff). Being ruled by grace brings an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Ephesians 5:5). This inheritance is both for now and for eternity: 'Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you' (Ephesians 5:14).

More blessed to give than to receive (Part 2)⁶

Acts 20:33ff

Among all those who are sanctified

Paul, having proclaimed God to the Ephesian elders, commended them to God and to God's message of grace. This was no mere formality, but Paul's anticipation that God's grace would build them up to maturity and give them their inheritance in God.

This building up and receiving an inheritance does not occur to individuals in isolation but happens 'among all who are sanctified' (Ephesians 20:32). Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians that the body of Christ is built up and brought to its unity and maturity by being filled with the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13). All this fullness comes from Christ as head, 'from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love' (Ephesians 4:14–16). It is in the body that truth is lived and spoken in love.

A strong sense of community existed when Paul first taught and preached at Ephesus, when the believers turned from evil practises by burning occultic literature, when miracles occurred and in how Paul was cared for by the Christians in the face of civil rioting against them (Acts 19:8–40).

These hands worked hard to help the weak

Paul declared to the Ephesian elders that he 'coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing':

You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak (Ephesians 20:33–35).

Evidence of community was apparent when Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers of the ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. These ministry actions included right relationships with each other based on their understanding of the truth (Ephesians 4:28–32).

This generosity, kindness and tender-hearted attitude is the opposite of greed, immorality and impurity and is the basis of true wisdom and careful living. It expresses thankfulness to God the Father in Jesus Christ by actions that accompany corporate worship. It includes true Christ-like submission to each other as God's family, and to God.

⁶ These notes and *The inheritance of grace* form a two-part series.

Remembering the Lord's word about giving

Paul was continually motivated by the words of Jesus – and here Paul gives us the only words of Jesus that are not in the Gospels. This statement summarises the gospel. It describes the manner of Christ's life and ministry, of his teaching in the beatitudes and the parables, and especially of his sufferings and death.

It emphasises that those who want to follow Jesus were to deny themselves and take up their own cross and follow him. They were to exchange their own goals and ambitions for his plans and purposes – an exchange that would enable and produce life rather than forfeit and forget it (Matthew 16:24, 25).

This lifestyle contrasted the over-bearing, repressive and dominating tyranny of their political and religious rulers by focusing on sacrificial selfless service

just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25–28).

Paul outlined Jesus' ministry in Ephesians 1:3ff, as mentioned in the notes on *the inheritance of grace*. Paul may as well have been exegeting 'the words of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 20:35) when he wrote that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has

- blessed us in Jesus Christ in 'the heavenly places' with all God's blessings. These blessings are the fullness of the Father-Christ relationship in the Holy Spirit, from eternity and in history.
- elected us in Jesus Christ to be pure and holy in his presence and to share in the divine fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- destined us to be God's family, adopted in God's love.
- shown us the divine mystery in this relational intimacy as God's plan to unify all creation in Jesus Christ so that when the times are complete all will be together in Christ.

Each of these divine actions is parallel and equivalent and provides different perspectives on one action, that of Christ's person and work. They are all the unrestrained outpouring of God's own self, determined by God's own nature – by God's wisdom and insight – and hence by God's goal for creation. They are all revelations of God's grace, of God's redemption of us to bring us together in and with him, forever.

Paul wrote of 'the great love with which [God] has loved us', of the riches of God's mercy and 'the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 2:4–10). This divine initiative was so that we become alive to God's goal for history, recreated in Christ to be what he has made us to be and to do what he has made us to do.

Paul urged his readers ‘to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’ (Ephesians 4:23–24). This is the true imitation (not mimicking) of God: ‘Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Ephesians 5:1, 2).

Paul’s life at Ephesus was one with his message: In Christ, Paul was the sacramental word, the incarnate word, because he was the crucified word. In his departure, he was also the final (*eschatological*) word, the words of fullness and completeness (*pleroma*), of appearing (*epiphaneia*), of disclosure (*apocalypse*), and of coming (*parousia*); knowing that these words would only be fully realised in the world to come: they would never see his face again.

His life was one with his Lord who gives grace to each person to enable the maturing and inheriting of which he spoke early in his farewell speech. He knew that this grace was Christ’s to give because Christ had first descended to the depths in his death, that he might ascend ‘far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things’ with these gifts of grace (Ephesians 4:10). This fall and rise of the kingdom of God is the victory of grace!

Kneeling, praying, grieving, and accompanying

Luke vividly recorded the farewell scene. They knelt and prayed in a mutual act of submission to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. They wept, kissed, and embraced each other in an outflow of the divine fullness they had known together. The elders then accompanied Paul to the ship never to see him again while acknowledging the overarching reign of God in Christ and the witness and testimony of the Holy Spirit.

More blessed to give than to receive

Acts 20:35

The words of the Lord Jesus

Paul wanted 'the words of the Lord Jesus' to remind the Ephesian elders of the person and action of God in Christ, and so in his people (Acts 20:32–35).

Jesus had pointed out that the Pharisees wanted to retain glory for themselves. This had closed them off from believing in God as the true and glorious giver:

How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God (John 5:44)?

We read elsewhere of the abundant giving of God in creation and of his forgiveness in redemption. God's giving brings salvation; the healing which comes by faith. He gives the 'crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him' (James 1:12–18; cf. Romans 1:16ff). These passages also indicate the results of refusing to receive God's giving with thankfulness.

God's giving has his signature

James and Paul are both adamant that all true giving flows from God's actions. This echoes Jesus' own words in Matthew 6:33 and 7:7–11 (cf. Luke 11:13) concerning the Father's kingdom, the Holy Spirit and 'all these things', i.e. concerning the Father's 'good gifts' which he freely gives.

Paul told the Athenians that in God 'we live and move and have our being' as creatures for whom God cares and provides, and as people with whom God wants to commune by creation and through 'the resurrection of the dead' (Acts 17:28–31). God gives as *author*. He sets the 'times and seasons' and 'the boundaries of our habitation' (Acts 1:8, 17:26). His giving has his *author-isation*; his signature. In this final sense, no one else can ever give anything other than what they have received (cf. Acts 20:35).

The Father's life, truth and love were in Jesus (John 5:40ff, 14:1ff). No wonder Jesus concluded with the words 'All authority has been given to me...' (Matthew 28:18–20). We, under his authorising, are to act in him, and so in the Holy Spirit. We are called to immerse the nations in this triune action.

God's giving is authentic

God's giving has his *author-ity* and is authentic; it is love. It is the outflowing of the Father's love for his Son, and the Son's love for his Father. We share in Jesus' love for the Father by the Holy Spirit and receive this testimony as a revelation of the person and work of the triune God (cf. John 3:31b–36).

Jesus came as the 'author and perfecter of our faith' (Hebrews 12:2). He is the Father's gift to us (John 3:16). The Holy Spirit is God's guarantee to us of his plan

to give us an inheritance as his people, 'to the praise of his glory', of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:13, 14). As guarantee, the Spirit brings us the fullness of Jesus' humanity (Ephesians 4:7–13). This is the essence of the 'gifts of the Spirit' (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:1–13). It is James' point when he declared that God was fulfilling God's own purposes when God birthed us by the message of God's truth with the intention that we would be 'a kind of first fruits' of God's creatures (James 1:18).

God's giving is abundant

God's free and abundant giving in creation comes to us afresh because Jesus endured the cross and despised its shame. Jesus selflessly endured the horror of personally bearing human opposition to God's giving. His horror was God *authorised* abandonment to the self-seeking, selfish receiving of which he spoke in John 5. There is nothing wrong with receiving-in-order-to-give (to God as worship or another in service), but there is everything wrong with receiving-in-order-to-retain (to vindicate or indulge oneself at another's expense).

We cannot comprehend the mystery of God's generosity outside of Jesus' cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)? That he was abandoned is clear enough. There can be no other explanation for his suffering. That his forsakenness was not because of his own sinfulness is also evidenced by the cries that he made in his suffering. Paul asked whether God, in giving rather than withholding his own Son, would fail to give God's redeemed humanity 'everything else'. Paul's point is not that the love of God is fractured, but that God-in-Christ gave everything in the face of human hostility and spiritual evil.

Here is the heartbeat of Paul's message to the Ephesian leaders, where he reminded them of Jesus' words that 'It is more blessed to give than receive'. These words reveal the person and action of God through his holiness, love and grace in the cross. They are words spoken by the Word, the Son, the man Jesus, in whom 'all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily' (Colossians 2:9). Our humanity is to be lived in him and expressed by receiving and using his gifts to us. These gifts are the gifts of God's Spirit, given so we share in God's plan to bring all nations home from their lost wanderings in a desolated creation to a New Jerusalem, to share in the life of the triune God himself.

God's words through Hosea were that he would 'heal their backsliding' and 'love them freely: for mine anger is turned away' (Hosea 14:4). No wonder Jesus commanded the disciples to 'Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give' (Matthew 10:8). As Paul wrote, we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand and share what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Paul's Letters

The resurrection of the dead

Romans 1:1–4, 8:11

Resurrection hope

Paul's gospel was firmly based on the resurrection of the dead. He identified himself as 'a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God'. Paul believed that this gospel was the good news God had earlier promised through God's prophets and which was recorded in the Hebrew Bible. The focus of this gospel was that Jesus was *the* Davidic son *and the* divine Son, and that his messianic identity had been powerfully revealed 'according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:1–4; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1ff).

Paul, on trial before Felix, declared he worshipped the God of his ancestors 'according to the Way' and that his hope in God included 'a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous' (Acts 24:14–16). He had already affirmed that he was a Pharisee and was on trial 'concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead'. This assertion provoked dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Acts 23:6ff).

Paul's belief in resurrection may have recalled Noah and the flood. Peter linked the account of Noah's flood to Christian baptism and the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18–22).

Paul may have remembered Abraham at Mt. Moriah. He may have seen Isaac symbolically raised from the dead by God's provision of the ram stuck in the bushes. Abraham trusted God by being willing to give up his only son at God's command – a command which taught Abraham that God did not achieve his purposes by that kind of sacrifice. Paul, writing to the Roman church, related Abraham's faith to Jesus' death and resurrection – and so linked our faith in God with Abraham and Jesus 'who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Romans 4:23–25).

Paul may have recalled Moses leading the Exodus from Egypt. Luke's record of Jesus' transfiguration discussion with Moses and Elijah focused on 'his departure [*exodus*], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31). Jesus' *exodus* was not only a reminder of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery but achieved a resurrection hope for all humanity.

Paul may have been reminded of resurrection nuances in Job's declaration during his intense sufferings that his redeemer lived and would prevail, and that Job would then see God and see God on Job's side (Job 19:25–27).

David's psalms may have informed Paul's thoughts about resurrection. For example, Psalm 16 speaks of the psalmist remaining steadfast and secure because he always kept the LORD in mind. His diligent meditation, the psalmist declared,

came about because the LORD had not abandoned him to Sheol or the Pit but had shown him the way of life and that in God's 'presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore' (Psalm 16:8–11).

Paul may have recalled the account of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath's son (1 Kings 17:8–24). Elisha's raising of the Shunammite woman's only son as an expression of Elisha's appreciation for her care might have been on Paul's mind (2 Kings 4:8–37, cf. 2 Kings 8:1–6), along with the coming to life of the man whose bones were thrown into Elisha's grave (2 Kings 13:20, 21).

Paul may have meditated on the prophecies about the nation's years in exile. Isaiah had prophesied that

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead (Isaiah 26:19).

Hosea had urged God's people to turn back to the LORD in anticipation that healing and recovery would replace suffering and affliction:

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 showers, like the spring rains that water the earth (Hosea 6:1–3).

Ezekiel's prophecy of the dry bones coming alive signified Israel's resurrection by the Holy Spirit according to God's word (Ezekiel 37:1–14).

Joel had prophesied that God would repay his people 'for the years that the swarming locust has eaten' and that they would respond by praising the LORD. Joel prophesied that the Spirit of the LORD would be poured out 'Even on the male and female slaves' – a prophecy Peter quoted on the day of Pentecost (Joel 2:19–32; Acts 2:14ff).

Paul may have recalled the prophecy in Daniel of the awakening of people asleep in earth's dust 'some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt'. This awakening would be the way the spiritually wise would shine brightly and 'lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever' (Daniel 12:2, 3).

Resurrection life

When Jesus began to teach his disciples about his rejection, death and resurrection, the disciples and others present may have also thought of some of these passages (Mark 8:31). They may have recalled John the Baptist declaring Jesus to be God's sin-removing Lamb (John 1:29). Jesus' death was no ordinary death – he offered himself as the once and for all sacrifice for our sins. He was both priest and sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1ff, cf. 12:1ff).

We may miss the link between sacrifice and resurrection. All animal and grain sacrifices in Israel were resurrection prophecies. The death of an animal promised renewed life for the person offering the sacrifice. The grain offerings spoke of God's promised blessings as redeemer of his people. Every ritual sacrifice pointed to the death and resurrection of Jesus where Jesus established life from the dead by the sacrifice of himself.

Jesus was crucified for teaching these themes. He declared his body was the true temple in which true worship occurred – and which would be destroyed, and then raised up in three days (John 2:13–22). His resurrection was essential to his being Messiah, and to God's gift of eternal life to all who believe, as the story of Lazarus indicates (John 11:21–26).

Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets not only in his death, but in his resurrection. All the related prophecies and events make full and final sense in this light. Paul explained that

if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Romans 8:10–11).

Because of Jesus' resurrection, all who are in him are already made alive, and everything of death is decaying before our eyes as the whole creation is renewed. Jesus has opened Paradise not only to the repentant thief crucified next to him but to all who have God's Holy Spirit dwell in them. The new creation is the fruit of Jesus' resurrection. Everyone in Messiah Jesus has been renewed by God's Holy Spirit and is in God's new creation – and everyone in God's new creation is in Jesus Christ having been reborn by God's Spirit. They have received God's Holy Spirit who brings them into communion with their resurrected Lord Jesus and his Father-God. They put to death the deeds of the flesh by God's Holy Spirit and know this Spirit who is life because of the righteousness of God set forth in his Son.

The intercession of the Spirit

Romans 8:18–30

Even the depths of God

Romans 8:26–27 states that the Spirit intercedes for us in our vulnerabilities and inadequacies with sighs too deep for words and that the Spirit's intercessions are according to God's will:

And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

These intercessions are for our benefit. Our prayers are ignorant of these realities unless the Holy Spirit brings the will and mind of God to our conscious selves. This ministry of the Spirit acts to transform us so that God, in his continual searching of our hearts, causes that in us to flourish which is most agreeable to God's-self. We are brought in this way into deeper communion with God by God's action in and for us.

Paul developed this theme in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, where the Spirit's ministry is described as bringing the depths of God and the 'mind of Christ' to us. God does this 'so that we may understand the gifts given us by God' – gifts previously not revealed and not understood by those who 'crucified the Lord of glory'. Paul added that these gifts had now been revealed by and through God's Holy Spirit who searches everything (even God), and that they involved

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

These passages describing the Holy Spirit searching our hearts have parallels in the messages and celestial revelations to the seven churches in the book of Revelation (cf. Revelation 2:7 etc., 4:5, 5:6).

The holiness and power of the Spirit

Paul began his letter to the Roman church by stating that 'the gospel of God' concerns Jesus Christ as David's descendant and God's Son having been raised from the dead by the power of 'the spirit of holiness' (Romans 1:1–4).

God's gospel brings nations to the 'obedience of faith' (Romans 15:16, 16:26). Paul saw himself called to proclaim fully 'the good news of Christ' by being

a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul insisted that he dared not talk about anything else except this work of Messiah Jesus in him and that he would do so by significant words *and* actions spoken and performed by the Holy Spirit's power (Romans 15:16–19).

This resurrection power is not impersonal or remote. Writing about Abraham and Sarah, and faith being reckoned as righteousness, Paul noted that the reckoning of righteousness to them has its parallel in those who now believe in God having raised Jesus from the dead – having been ‘handed over to death for our trespasses’ and ‘raised for our justification’ (Romans 4:24, 25).

Jesus’ resurrection power establishes and declares us justified. Our justification is essential to God’s gospel (Romans 1:1, 15:16) and works in at least two ways (Romans 5:1–5). It firstly brings us peace with God, accesses his grace and fills us with hope that we will share his glory. It also makes sense of our sufferings, maturing us in our daily lives.

This sharing or participation is the outpouring of God’s love into our hearts through God’s gift of God’s Holy Spirit to us (cf. Philippians 2:1ff; Romans 5:5)! God’s redemptive, reconciling gift of grace is a consistent theme in the first eight chapters of Romans.⁷

New life in the Spirit

The intercession of the Holy Spirit referred to by Paul in Romans 8 results from the new life that the Spirit brings. Romans 1:4 and 6:4 inform us that our baptism signifies our being both buried and raised with Jesus by the Father’s glory and ‘according to the Spirit of holiness’, ‘so we too might walk in newness of life’. Romans 7:6 similarly declares that we are released from legal tyranny, imprisonment and slavery to live ‘in the new life of the Spirit’.

The context of Paul’s statement about the Spirit’s intercession in Romans 8 includes his affirmation that ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ has released us from the ‘law of sin and death’ (Romans 8:1–8). This liberation is life-giving, because ‘if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness’ (Romans 8:9–10). Moreover,

if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit that dwells in you (Romans 8:11).

Our whole beings are redirected and reorientated (Romans 8:12–17). We are now led by the Spirit and not tyrannised by our sinful flesh. We do not need to cry in anger to God as though he is a cruel tyrant but seek God in the warmth of his purity and love as his adopted children. Our prayers and praises flow from the witness of the Holy Spirit with our redeemed spirits.

⁷ For example, Romans 3:21–26 concerns God’s redemption in Christ Jesus. Romans 5:6–11 describes our reconciliation to God who loved us ‘while we were yet sinners’, while Romans 5:12–21 discusses grace reigning through righteousness to give eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 6:5–11 considers our being ‘united with him in a resurrection like his’.

Future glory in the Spirit

The resurrection of Jesus, according to the Holy Spirit, was so powerful that the whole creation awaits its full outworking, including through the revelation of the entire family of God. It means the liberation of creation from its emptiness, with creation receiving the liberty of the glory – and the glory of the liberty – of God’s family! We are encouraged in our sufferings in the knowledge that the intercessory work of the Holy Spirit is completely linked with the resurrection of Jesus, the renewal of creation, our adoption into God’s family and ‘the redemption of our bodies’ (Romans 8:22, 23).

The ‘Likewise’ Paul used about the Spirit’s help in Romans 8:25 is significant. Paul’s logic was that ‘if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. *Likewise* the Spirit helps us in our weakness’ (Romans 8:25, 26, italics added). The Spirit’s intercession is inseparable from

our hope of sharing the glory of God. ... 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 5:2–5).

God is more than able to help us as God’s Holy Spirit sweeps over the depths of God’s creation (cf. Philippians 1:19; 2 Timothy 1:14. Also, Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6; 1 Corinthians 2:10).

Paul’s message to the Roman believers was that the Holy Spirit’s work in the resurrection of Christ was for them and for all creation! This resurrection action is God’s will and purpose. It is his gospel, and it concerns his Son, Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection. The Spirit knows the depths of God, searches our depths and brings us to life in union with Christ. We are adopted into the Father’s family. We are liberated from the condemnation of the law, the wrath of God, the wages of sin and the tyranny of the flesh and its desires.

Of ourselves, we are ignorant of God’s ways. It is the Holy Spirit who brings the will and mind of God in Christ Jesus to us. It is the Holy Spirit who brings us to God and his loving grace and mercy and gives us true hope in life and death. It is the Holy Spirit who intervenes in our trials and troubles for God’s sake, in order that God will be glorified for his goodness and mercy. It is the Holy Spirit who intervenes for our sakes, so that we may present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God by the mercies and grace of God (Romans 11:25–36, 12:1–2, 15:7–21, 16:25–27).

This new life in the Holy Spirit is expressed in and through our communion and community together as God’s family, with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Romans 12–14). This new life flows out in righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit as we live in and under the reign of God (Romans 14:17). This new life is our ministry to all creation (cf. Romans 1:5, 15:14–17). It is our sharing in the work of the Father, the Son and the Spirit to renew all things.

God is for us
Romans 8:32–39

Coping in crises

Many of us may have been through at least one, and possibly many personal crises. None of us knows how well we will cope in the future. Where do we see God in these things? Do we see God in them? What does Jesus' life and death mean for us? We learn from Romans 8 of God's strengthening power and love to help us conquer *in* all these things. There is realism in Paul's encouragement: he did not write *from* all these things. There is no triumphalism in his message. The future will bring new and sometimes unwelcome challenges despite our best intentions; there will be unforeseen seasons of suffering, as well as times of hope, joy and prosperity. All manner of terrestrial and celestial creatures will act for us or against us and we will eventually die! Yet the familiar promise in Paul's letter is that 'God works for the good of those who love him' (Romans 8:28 NIV).

In what ways does God work? What does God do? This passage teaches two principles: we often do not know how to pray, and we may be unable to defend ourselves. These realities are reflected in two liturgical prayers:

Lord our God, fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking; have compassion on our infirmities; and those things, which for our unworthiness we dare not and for our blindness we cannot ask, graciously give us for the worthiness of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

O God, the author and lover of peace, in knowledge of whom stands our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; defend us your servants in all assaults of our enemies, that surely trusting in your defence, we may not fear the power of any adversaries, through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁸

What does God do? In what ways does God help us? Romans 8:26ff indicates that the Holy Spirit

helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The Spirit's intercession is not alone, as 'It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us' (Romans 8:34). Paul describes these intercessions using present tenses.

⁸ *An Australian Prayer Book*, (Sydney, NSW: Anglican Information Office, 1978), 37, 28.

God is holy and loving in judgement

To whom is this dual intercession made? It is made to God 'who searches the heart', to God who is light (Romans 8:27; cf. Psalm 139; 1 John 1:1–2:1). The book of Hebrews states that none of us can hide from God 'to whom we must render an account' (Hebrews 4:13). The writer adds that it 'is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' and urges readers not to 'refuse Him who is speaking' because 'our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrew 10:31, 12:25–29).

No intercession made by the Holy Spirit or the Son of God will endorse sin or support evil. The Old Testament indicated that God works to defeat and destroy evil (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:15–43).

To assume the Holy Spirit and Jesus intercede for us against God the Father's holiness is to divide the triune God. Jesus does not save us from an angry Father or a hostile God. To have acted against God would have denied that God is for us and not against us! Jesus made it clear that he, along with his Father and the Holy Spirit, have no agreement with permanent defiance and unrepentant deviance (e.g. John 16:8–10). Jesus warned of the consequences of rebellion against God on many occasions.

God initiates redemption and intercession

The Spirit's and Jesus' intercessions for us respond to God's initiatives. Paul wrote that 'God is for us'. God's redemption in Jesus means that the judge of all humanity will hear no charge against his own redeemed people. Paul wanted his readers to note that everything the Holy Spirit and the Son of God do is at God's initiative. God is the one 'who gave [Jesus] up for all of us'. God 'did not withhold his own Son' from the horrors of evil defiance and demonic abuse *in working with and in him by the Holy Spirit* to defeat sin and wickedness. God's giving up and not holding back his Son was not God acting *against* his Son but acting *in and with* his Son for the renewal and liberation of 'creation itself', including our 'adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Romans 8:21–23, 31, 32; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

John expressed similar thoughts. He wrote that we make the Father a liar if we deny the adequacy of his Son's blood to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. John indicated that the Son's intercession is based on his being the 'atoning sacrifice for our sins'. He is this now because God 'loved us and sent his Son' for this purpose (1 John 4:10, cf. 1:5–2:2). John repeatedly emphasises 'the Father' in this divine action for us (cf. Romans 6:4, 8:15).

The writer of the book of Hebrews spoke of Jesus Christ giving us access to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:1–10). It is because the throne is of grace that Jesus Christ gives us access and that the church comes 'to God the judge of all, ... and to Jesus' whose death 'speaks better than the blood of Abel' (Hebrews 12:22–24).

The Holy Spirit and the Son are making intercession to the 'God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' who sent Jesus to secure our redemption. They are asking the Father who initiated our salvation to secure what he planned before creation (Ephesians 1:3, 4).

The intercessions of Jesus and the Spirit are based on Jesus' once for all self-offering (Hebrews 7:27). He has entered heaven 'now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf' (Hebrews 9:24). The writer of Hebrews signified that Jesus' death is adequate for all time and needs no repetition. Just as all of us die once, so Jesus was 'offered once to bear the sins of many'. God no doubt rejoiced at his Son's ascension; we will no doubt rejoice when our Saviour comes to those who eagerly await him (Hebrews 9:28; cf. Galatians 5:5; Philippians 3:20).

God effects the defeat of evil in us

Romans 8 continually brings us back to our current lives and the traumas and struggles that we may experience. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all work as one God for our welfare. Paul asked who accuses us. His answer excludes the Father, the Son and the Spirit (Romans 8:31; cf. Revelation 12:10–11)!

God is at work to deliver us in all our crises. Nothing can separate us from God's love; from the love of God the Father, his Son and the Holy Spirit. God's Son works with the Holy Spirit and the Father to ensure that this is so. All manner of difficulties may come, but God is for us, even though we were 'accounted [by human and spiritual antagonists] as sheep to be slaughtered' (Romans 8:36, cf. Psalm 44:22). The Holy Spirit intercedes for us within us and Christ Jesus as ascended Lord is with us and intercedes for us by God's Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14–27).

This great activity of the Holy Spirit is also described in Hebrews 10, where we read of Christ sitting 'down at the right hand of God' and waiting for the defeat of God's enemies, having 'perfected for all time those who are sanctified' by offering himself as 'a single sacrifice for sins'.

The writer then affirmed the work of the Holy Spirit in this triune task as being the installing and inscribing of his covenant-love-law of forgiveness and mercy on our hearts and in our minds (Hebrews 10:15–17).

Even the depths of God

1 Corinthians 1, 2

Pentecost Sunday celebrates the birth of the church and Jesus Christ's pouring out of the Holy Spirit from the Father's right hand as ascended humanity, as Messiah, Prophet, Priest and King. He leads our worship from among us as Word become flesh in the fullness of the Spirit (John 1; Hebrews 2).

Paul wrote in these first two chapters of his letter to the Corinthian Christians about the ongoing Pentecostal reality that constitutes the life and identity of the household of God. Two of his many significant statements include:

God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:9).

[God our Father] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30, cf. 1:3).

What is the fellowship of his Son?

One main theme in this chapter is the proclamation of Christ crucified who is the power and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24). Jews demanding signs and Greeks desiring wisdom would not understand God's weakness and foolishness as his power and wisdom apart from believing this proclamation.

It is important to remember that Paul is speaking of power and weakness, and wisdom and foolishness, in the context of humanity's relationship with God. Throughout this letter Paul explores a range of social, educational and political issues impacted by his foundational thinking about God and humanity.

Paul indicated something radically different from humanly derived religious societies or spiritual communities by using the expression: 'the fellowship of his Son'. It is life in 'the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus', a life currently rich in spiritual gifts and appropriate for 'the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:4–9). This treasure is contrasted with 'those who are perishing', who saw themselves as strong and intelligent enough to set their own agendas and determine their own destinies (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The fellowship of God's Son is the community of God's people who derive their identity and action from the grace of God in the cross of Christ. It is those people whom God 'strengthens ... to the end, so that [they] may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:8). The cross therefore marks the end of their former life with its divisions and immorality and the beginning of a new life where they are 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' by the grace and peace of 'God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:2, 3).

What does it mean for God to be the source of your life?

Paul's answer to this question is that God, whom he called 'God our Father' in his introductory greeting (1 Corinthians 1:3),

is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:30, 31).

Our life, for Paul, is in Christ Jesus and who he has become 'for us ... from God'. Central to all that Paul wrote is humanity's helplessness and ineptitude concerning salvation now and in the future. In his death, Christ Jesus 'became for us' all that was needed to save us by faith in him. Our faith is in God's faithfulness in 'being the source of your life in Christ Jesus' (1 Corinthians 1:9, 30). God the Father of Jesus Christ his Son and our Lord is 'the source' of all that has happened in and through 'Christ crucified' (1 Corinthians 1:3, 9, 22). God has saved us from perishing and given us life in his Son, removing our shame and disgrace and any reason for boasting in ourselves and our achievements. God has brought us to know God and to be in God's presence free from human self-serving ambitions (1 Corinthians 1:21, 29).

Paul lists this work of God in Christ under at least four headings:

- wisdom, decreed by God 'before the ages for our glory' (1 Corinthians 2:7, cf. 1:30).
- righteousness (truth and justification) (1 Corinthians 5:8, 6:11, 13:6b; cf. Romans 1:17; 3:21ff, 4:3ff, 5:7ff, 8:10, 14:17; 2 Corinthians 5:21).
- sanctification, bringing together everyone everywhere who worships Jesus as Messiah and Lord (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- redemption from perishing with the rulers of this age (1 Corinthians 2:6).

Paul declared that God was revealing this extraordinary divine work through God's Spirit, and that no one had expected or imagined it even though it had already been written down. Those who loved God receive these revelations knowing that the Spirit searches 'even the depths of God':

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10).

The fellowship of God's Son is our knowing God as Father, as he gives us life in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It is not something that we construct or contrive – even based on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Rather, it is reaching maturity by living in the realities God has provided for those who love God. This maturity is a mystery determined before creation for the glory of those who believe (1 Corinthians 2:6–9).

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

The fellowship of God's Son involves more than the human relationships of the people of God (1 Corinthians 1:2). It is a participation, by the Holy Spirit, in everything God has provided from God's own depths for those who love God (1 Corinthians 2:9, 10). To receive 'the mind of Christ' is to receive him through the Spirit; to receive Christ Jesus who is 'for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1:30, 2:16). The mystery to which Paul refers is what God has prepared for those who love the God who is the origin of their lives in Christ Jesus; of lives lived in 'the fellowship of his Son' (1 Corinthians 2:9, 1:9).

Jesus is not only the fulfilment of God's purposes in humanity and its history in this creation, but a fulfilment which brings humanity to share in his eternal fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the triune God. This is the Father's initiative, the Son's testimony in his cross, and the Spirit's sharing of his searching of 'everything, even the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 1:6, 30, 2:2, 10). This life is what Paul meant when later in this letter he wrote about needing to 'have love' ahead of human or angelic speaking, prophetic powers, and knowledge and understanding of divine mysteries:

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

This love, this life, this liberation, is the revelation of God to, in and through us, and unveils the mystery of 'even the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:10)!

Proclaiming Christ crucified

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

No divisions or boasting

The first three chapters of this letter centre around humility and church unity. Paul emphasised the futility of boasting and its associated sectarianism (1 Corinthians 1:18–29, 2:14, 3:1–4, 12–15, 18–20) by pointing out the richness of their life in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30, 31, 2:6–12, 15, 16, 3:21–23).

Familiarity with Paul's emphasis on proclaiming Christ crucified may miss the context in which he explained his theme. The Corinthians to whom he wrote were 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' and called to be saints along with anyone in any place who acknowledges Jesus Christ as 'their Lord and ours'. His prayer was that God our Father would continue to strengthen them while they were alive so that they would be 'blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Paul believed that God would faithfully achieve this goal, having already called them 'into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord'. He therefore appealed to them 'by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' to live in unity with one mind and purpose and without divisions (1 Corinthians 1:1–10).

The power and wisdom of God

God's power and wisdom declared sinful efforts in trying to rescue ourselves as weakness and exposed human wisdom about our need for salvation as foolishness. These human failures were the sources of division and boasting at Corinth. Then, as always, they arise when we live and act from an insecure foundation rather than from the foundation already in place in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11).

God does not simply put his sure foundation in place and expect us to build on it solely by our own human insights and energies. The wise person builds on this rock according to the grace of God (1 Corinthians 3:10; cf. Psalm 118:19–25; Zechariah 4:1–14; Matthew 7:24–27). This grace flows from the work of the cross in those who believe.

The cross is where God saves those who hear this word of proclamation (1 Corinthians 1:18–25, 2:1–5; cf. Acts 18:5). His grace is necessary both to save us and to keep us in his redemption. It is his present action towards us that secures us to live in God's presence (1 Corinthians 1:30).

The message of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but it is God's power to those who are *being* saved (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul's contrast in this verse is between foolishness and power – not foolishness and wisdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 and Psalm 14, where fools say that there is no God who can or will save God's people)!

The power of God destroys human wisdom by exposing its weakness and folly. By destroying 'the wisdom of the wise', God declares it impotent to save and so shows it to be ineffective and powerless (1 Corinthians 1:19). Human wisdom is ineffective in working salvation and in leading us to know God. It can be helpful but is not of itself redemptive in God's economy.

Likewise, human power is foolish if directed at its own narrative and glory and cannot save 'those who are perishing' (1 Corinthians 1:18). It leads, as Paul noted, to pride and division, so resulting in foolishness, not wisdom.

The signs demanded by the Jews and the wisdom sought by the Greeks do not bring us to know God. This is not so by accident but is testimony to the wisdom and plan of God. We come to know God from the proclamation of Christ crucified, which is 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'. Paul stated that God had decided to save Jews and Greeks 'through the foolishness of our proclamation ... [by] Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:21–24).

Having contrasted how those who are perishing see the cross (as foolishness) with how those who are being saved see it (as the power of God), Paul summarised his thinking by declaring that 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength' (1 Corinthians 1:25). Here the comparison between God's ways and human actions is complete and matches Paul's witness to their own lives. God's choice of what and who the world considers foolish, weak, insignificant and despised so as to shame those who profile themselves as wise, strong, exalted and admirable was, according to Paul 'so that no one might boast in the presence of God' (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

The source of your life in Christ Jesus

Paul's emphasis is on God's initiative and action: 'God made' (1 Corinthians 1:20), 'God decided' (1 Corinthians 1:21), and 'God chose' (1 Corinthians 1:27 twice, 1:28). No wonder he declared God to be

the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Paul's letter reinforces Luke's testimony of Paul's year and a half of ministry in Corinth. Paul, according to Luke, 'was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus' when he first arrived in Corinth. He then spent time with the Gentiles after Jews had 'opposed and reviled him'. Many 'who heard Paul became believers and were baptised'. Despite complaints from the Jews, Gallio, the Roman Consul, would not act against him – in accordance with a vision Paul was given (Acts 18:1–17).

The God Paul proclaimed revealed himself in Christ crucified. This self-disclosure comes not primarily as information *about* God but as revelation *of* God. We are not merely spectators of a tragedy, but we receive the ‘gifts bestowed on us by God’ (1 Corinthians 2:12). ‘God gives the growth’ or nothing substantial is produced (1 Corinthians 3:6–14).

These gifts and this growth come as faith responds to God by hearing the ‘message about the cross’ proclaimed by his servants (1 Corinthians 1:18, 23, 2:1–5). This proclamation has divine wisdom and strength. It is given in human weakness, trembling and fear – and so demonstrates the action of Holy Spirit and the power of God.

Central to this divine power and wisdom in the humanity of Christ crucified is the searching of the depths of each human person by the Spirit – who alone knows and shares the depths of God in Christ. The word of the cross reaches the deepest dimensions of our humanity and goes widest and highest to overthrow the kingdoms of this world and to herald and bring the reign of the crucified and risen Lord of glory. This victory brings to light what God prepared ‘before the ages for our glory’ – realities which are beyond our own perception, hearing or understanding, but which are ‘prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:6–16)!

Considering our own calling

What does this mean for us? We may have humble origins and know something of God’s glorious purposes (1 Corinthians 1:26, 2:9). These truths may keep us from being puffed up in false knowledge and pride and remind us of the love of God in which we live (1 Corinthians 13).

Given our potential to fail and God’s insistence that he accomplishes his own purposes, we can marvel at his mercies and be in holy awe of the peril of disregarding his warnings:

God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:28, 29).

This different form of boasting means rejecting the spirit of the world and receiving ‘the Spirit that is from God’. This is the way we come to know God, receive his instruction and have ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians (2:12–16).

All things to all people

1 Corinthians 9:19–27

True freedom serves other people

Paul built on the thesis with which his letter commenced. He declared that while the good news about Jesus' crucifixion was folly to those who were perishing, it was God's power to those God was saving. This salvation, Paul declared, was according to God's wisdom and was revealed by the folly of their proclamation to a world which 'did not know God through wisdom' (1 Corinthians 9:18, 21).

Paul then asked his readers to reflect on God's preference for what the world regarded as being foolish, weak, inconsequential and worthless over what the world considered as wise, powerful, significant and valuable 'so that no one might boast in the presence of God' (1 Corinthians 1:18, 26–29).

Charles Wesley echoed Paul's sentiments:

Fools and madmen let us be,
Yet is our sure trust in Thee;
Faithful is the promised word,
We shall all be as our Lord.⁹

Freedom, for Paul, did not license him to do whatever he wanted to indulge himself in doing, but was liberty to do what best proclaimed the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the Galatian church that they were to use the freedom to which they were called not as 'an opportunity for self-indulgence' but as a circumstance where they could serve each other in love:

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Galatians 5:13, 14).

Paul clearly knew the substance of the Collect for peace:

O God, the author and lover of peace, in knowledge of whom stands our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; defend us your servants in all assaults of our enemies, that, surely trusting in your defence, we may not fear the power of any adversaries, through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁰

⁹ Charles Wesley, 'Jesus Comes with All His Grace,'
<https://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/hymn/jwg04/jwg0400.html>.

¹⁰ *An Australian Prayer Book*, 28.

Paul wrote to the Roman church that

We who are strong ought ... not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself (Romans 15:1–3).

The pleasure of Christ was not self-serving but other-person-serving. It was the pleasure of Jesus Christ to move into the displeasure of humanity, thereby enabling God to bring us his joy and affirmation. He entered areas of human life where he was insulted and not congratulated for caring for people. Paul was writing that he wanted to be like his Saviour and Lord. Paul's goal was sharing a gospel relevant to all humanity (cf. Philippians 3:7ff).

Paul was a Jew, but 'became as a Jew' in identifying with their circumstances (1 Corinthians 9:20; cf. Romans 15:8ff). Paul similarly embraced those of his Jewish heritage by becoming 'as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law)' (cf. Romans 8:3 where Jesus was said to have come 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'). The same applied for those 'outside the law', with Paul quick to affirm that he was 'under Christ's law' (1 Corinthians 9:21; cf. Romans 2:12ff; Ephesians 2:11ff). Law, for Paul, was a matter of God's covenant love and was a life-giving love-law while being under the Mosaic law outside of the gospel meant being under its condemnation.

True weakness moves to other centre-points

Paul then stated that 'To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak' (1 Corinthians 9:22). In contrast to his earlier identifications, Paul did not write that he became *like* the weak, but that he became weak (2 Corinthians 4:1ff)! Weakness, as mentioned, was the basis of God's choice in saving humanity through the death of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:27–29). God's power and the power of God's gospel is in this weakness (1 Corinthians 1:17, 25).

Christ's weakness was his strength. It was only in his weakness that his true strength was seen (2 Corinthians 13:4, cf. Romans 1:4). True weakness is known in giving and not in grasping: it is that giving that reveals true deity (Philippians 2:5ff).

To move to the centre of another situation, of other people, of another person without proud dependency on human power, politics, economics, psychology, technology, religious practice or education is to be weak as a human and strong in the Spirit. This weakness, Paul asserted, was so that no-one boasts in and of themselves, but only in what God has accomplished (1 Corinthians 1:31; cf. Jeremiah 9:23; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10). For Paul, becoming weak was the basis for being *all* to *all*. It was not merely another missiological aspect and aim. It was evidence of God's presence with him (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9).

True ministry lives the grace of the gospel

The gospel was Paul's reference point for everything he did. He wanted to share the gospel and its blessings wherever he was able (1 Corinthians 9:23; cf. Romans 15:27–29; Philippians 3:7ff). His apostolic and pastoral ministry expressed his convictions:

Christ ... is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God (2 Corinthians 13:3, 4).

Paul's reference to self-control and training made it clear that weakness was not abrogation or abandonment of human effort and enterprise. This training was not aimless but made good use of his gifts and talents (cf. 1 Corinthians 3) and benefited from the Lord's discipline (cf. Hebrews 12). Paul wanted to be counted with all of God's faithful people (cf. Hebrews 11).

Punishing his body and enslaving it did not refer to some physical flagellation or masochistic drive (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:3–13), but to the spiritual battle he continually faced, and to his resolve that grace defeat sin's domination of him (cf. Romans 7). Paul knew God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7ff).

His preaching was determined by God's love in Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:1ff; 1 Corinthians 13:1ff; 2 Corinthians 5:14). If we have, like Paul, been gripped by the weakness of Christ, then we will be captured by the strongest of all, and that is the love of God in Christ (cf. Romans 8:31–39).

Paul's prize was certain and sure, and Paul knew whom he had believed and the eternal life that God promises his people (Philippians 3:7–15; 1 Timothy 1:15–19, 6:11–16; 2 Timothy 1:8–12, 4:6–8).

Faithful God

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

The salvation that saved us and the salvation that saves us

The warnings in this passage question whether their so-called freedom was simply a covering for disobedience (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1, 18, 19). Paul's statement about his longing that his readers were not 'unaware' of Israel's history links his previous discussion about freedom and self-control with the warnings from Israel's history that are in this section of his letter.

A bland bankrupt entry to the kingdom of God is hardly appropriate, as Paul outlined earlier when writing about building well (1 Corinthians 3:10–15). His reference to 'our ancestors' may include those who were not Jewish, possibly by thinking of Abraham 'as the father of us all', or by identifying believers as being in continuity with those who 'were baptised into Moses' (1 Corinthians 10:1; Romans 4:16–17). Alternatively, Paul may have had in mind just his own Jewish heritage.

By referring to 'the cloud' and 'the sea' – and by inference the fire and the wilderness land – Paul was reminding his readers of God's covenant presence with his people as they travelled from Egypt to the promised land (1 Corinthians 10:2). Baptism into Moses pointed to their initiation as redeemed people; an initiation which had daily significance for the people of God. The Corinthians were to understand God's salvation in terms of having saved them as well as continuing to save them (1 Corinthians 10:3–5)!

Paul's references to 'spiritual food' and 'spiritual drink' provide a brilliant summary of Israel's Exodus transit experiences, and of Jesus' teaching about himself, his Father and the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 10:3; John 6:26–35, 7:37–38. cf. Exodus 17; Numbers 20; 1 Samuel 2:2; Psalms 18, 118; Isaiah 28:16, 44:6–8).

Four warnings

The Exodus events 'occurred as examples' for the Corinthian Christians, encouraging them not to 'desire evil' as those who were rescued from Egypt had done (1 Corinthians 10:5, 6; cf. Psalm 95). Paul named four evil desires which profile much of what he wrote in the previous ten chapters.

Idolatry and festivity

Paul linked idolatry and self-indulgent festivity, just as he had connected true worship with holy festivity (1 Corinthians 10:7, 8; cf. Exodus 32:6):

Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil,

but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8, cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17–34).

Sexual immorality and death

Paul repeatedly links idolatry and adultery (as in sexual immorality in general).

1 Corinthians 10:8 recalls Numbers 25 and Balaam's seduction. What Balaam was unable to do by false prophecy, he seems to have done by encouraging Israel's neighbours to seduce them (cf. Revelation 2:14).

Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that their unity with Christ was linked with their bodies being temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, 6:15–20; 2 Corinthians 6:14–16). While he does not explicitly identify Christ as bridegroom, he used the language of marriage and husband in Ephesians 5.

The gaudy festivities of idolatry and the lethal results of sexual immorality are evidences of seriously misplaced love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13).

Testing God and serpentine evil

Paul identified Christ with the LORD by indicating that Israel 'put Christ to the test' in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:9; cf. Numbers 21:4–9; John 3:14–16).

We might test God by wanting to know how far we can go without being caught! We might be self-led into temptation or led by others! Jesus taught his disciples to pray that they would not be led into temptation but delivered from evil. He did not pray for God not to lead them into temptation full stop. God does not lead us into temptation; temptation is already amply present every day. Deliverance from evil is what we require (Matthew 6:5–14; Luke 11:1–13).

Complaining about God and destruction

Numbers 16 records a rebellion against Moses' leadership, which Paul may have linked with those who contested Paul's apostolic own authority and call (cf. 1 Corinthians 3, 4, 9; 2 Corinthians 9, 10).

The ends of the ages and the never-ending ages

Paul twice mentions these things as being instructive examples about avoiding evil. He did not see his readers as of the same era as the Israelites in the time of the Exodus, but as those 'on whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). By the ends, plural, of the ages, Paul might have had in mind different outcomes for people depending on their response to the gospel. He may have been distinguishing between those who were standing and those who would fall. The true people of God are in one sense always under wraps, and we need to take care so that we avoid the pride and boasting Paul wrote about in this letter (cf. Philippians 3:12–4:1; 2 Timothy 4:6–8)!

Jesus told many parables about the end-times; about our end-time (e.g. Luke 12:35–46, 19:11–25). Paul’s warning to those who thought they were standing applied just as well to those who disregarded restraint as to those who over-applied legalism and self-severity (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1ff, 14:1ff). Either way, we are not to test God by seeing how far we can go before God catches us or calculate the penalties God may apply to see if they are tolerable for us!

When *we* are tested, we can be confident that God is faithful, and that his dealings with us are not capricious or mean-spirited (1 Corinthians 10:13). God’s protection of us is complete, as he taught his disciples: ‘Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil’ (Matthew 6:5–14; Luke 11:1–13)! The goal of God’s testing of us, however we may understand it, is always purifying.

Our trials are not unique; they are just consistent with our being at the ends of the ages. Just as getting Israel out of Egypt was one task, and getting Egypt out of Israel a subsequent activity, so it is with us. God always provides an escape from temptation: we can trust God that God can be trusted!

Israel’s Exodus, with its cloud, fire, manna and water, involved learning to trust God. God was their Rock as they travelled through harsh, dry, sandy and rocky deserts:

On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand.¹¹

We can stand in the cloud and fire of God’s presence, with the manna from heaven and the water from the rock, and having done all, we can still stand (Ephesians 6:10–20). We can stand not based on our own self-assessment, but in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our hope! He is our travelling companion and destination. Christ Jesus takes us through the ends of the ages to the ages that never end!

Rock of Ages, cleft for me
Let me hide myself in thee¹²

¹¹ Edward Mote, ‘My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,’
https://hymnary.org/text/my_hope_is_built_on_nothing_less.

¹² Augustus Montague Toplady, ‘Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,’
https://hymnary.org/text/rock_of_ages_cleft_for_me_let_me_hide.

Warnings from the Exodus

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Baptised into Moses

Paul reminded his readers that Israel was under the covering and protection of the cloud and the fire (1 Corinthians 10:1–4). He referred to this – together with their crossing of the Red Sea – as a baptism into Moses; a baptism through which they came to receive spiritual food and drink. This included all the people – *all* were under the cloud, *all* passed through the sea, *all* were baptised into Moses, *all* ate and *all* drank the God-given spiritual nourishment.

Paul's parallel is clear: *all* the Corinthian Christians were baptised into Christ, and *all* drank of his Spirit (1 Corinthians 1:13ff, 6:11ff, 12:13). *All* were under Christ's covering (1 Corinthians 11:1ff). Yet it was still possible that, like the Israelites, 'God was not pleased with most of them' (1 Corinthians 10:5, cf. 5:5, 11:30; Luke 18:1–8). His warning was clear:

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did (1 Corinthians 10:6).

Just as the Corinthian believers were told that Israel's Exodus was an example for them, so we are to see their *exodus* in and under Christ as a further example to us. Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus at his transfiguration concerning him accomplishing his departure, his *exodus* (Luke 9:31). Jesus is depicted in the New Testament as the second Moses (e.g. Revelation 15). Christ's *exodus* is not something that we observe, so much as something in which we live! Paul's message is for *all* the church and *every* congregation!

Idolatry, immorality, insurrection, and irritability

From his reading of the Exodus under Moses, Paul warned the Corinthians concerning: four 'I' problems!

- **Idolatry.** When Moses seemed slow on returning from Mt. Sinai, the people's confidence shifted from God to themselves and their own corporate and personal ministries and abilities. What they thought they could do together replaced the word of God that they had heard from Moses. Their idolatry – seen in the golden calf – had its expression in false worship and in the eating, drinking and playing that accompanied it (Exodus 32). This was a counterfeit, counterpart to what God had taught them (Exodus 24:9–11; cf. Deuteronomy 6:1–9).
- **Immorality.** After Balaam had failed to curse Israel, he advised the Midianites to engage the Israelites in immorality (Numbers 25:1ff, cf. 31:16; Jude 11). How easily purity of life – in thought and deed – can be compromised for the sake of immediate and passing convenience.

- **Insurrection.** The story of the bronze serpent is an account of people trying to hijack Moses as God's leader of his people. At first their request may have seemed reasonable, but their true intention soon became clear (Numbers 21:1–9).
- **Irritability.** The refusal of the Israelites to believe Joshua and Caleb and Moses' striking of the rock a second time were evidence that they were a 'rebellious generation' (Exodus 17; Numbers 14, 20; Psalms 78:1–8, 95:1–11). The Israelites were only safe from 'the destroyer' as they lived faithfully to their baptism into Moses (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1–5; Exodus 4:21–26, 12:23).

Restraint and promise

Paul's letters to the Corinthians make it clear that all these four warnings were needed. Paul repeated what he had already said after stating his four warnings:

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ... These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:6–11).

For Paul, the example of Israel's Exodus was given for two reasons – reasons that speak of restraint, as well as promise. He wanted them to live mindful of the 'ends of the ages' that had come upon them rather than by desiring evil as the Israelites did (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Many Corinthians would have found it difficult to discern what God was doing and what was fallen human enterprise as they reflected on what was happening among them. In what ways were they to know? Where were they to look? To whom were they to listen, especially when their community was factionalised (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10ff, 3:1ff)?

Paul's answer was that God is heard in his Word and by receiving his Spirit. Their life as God's people was in hearing God speak to them, and in obeying God. God's Word is Christ, whose voice they were to hear by the Holy Spirit. Paul saw the centrality of Moses as God's voice to the people in the Israelite Exodus, and so saw the centrality of Jesus Christ as God's revelatory message by the Holy Spirit in his own apostolic ministry to the churches.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in a later letter regarding his concerns about false super-apostles (2 Corinthians 11:5, 12:11). To whose voice were they listening? Whose messages were they hearing? Whose Spirit was leading them?

This brings us to Paul's warning to all who are part of God's *exodus* of his people in Christ into the land promised to them for all eternity. Paul wanted to assure his readers that all these events which came upon Israel, and all the turmoil in their church at Corinth, were not beyond what anyone was 'able to endure'. God is

faithful: he provides 'the way out' of the inevitable testing that they experienced (1 Corinthians 10:13; Luke 23:43).

What then was Paul's warning? He was alerting those who thought they were standing that they should be careful lest they fell. He was warning them not to think that they, of themselves, could in any way provide a way out when they were tested. The only way through trials would be by paths that God would provide, and those ways would involve *hearing* the word that God was speaking to them by the Holy Spirit.

The problem at the heart of the Corinthian church was their confidence in the pre-eminence of themselves and their ministries. It was like the Galatian difficulty, and the dilemma of any of us who become the centre of our theology and life – rather than Christ. If we are truly standing, it is not we who stand, but Christ who stands! If we fall and fail, it is not Christ who falls and fails, but ourselves! We never stand of ourselves; we only ever stand in Christ. He alone stands in the judgement (cf. Psalms 24, 130; 2 Corinthians 8:9).

Paul was keen that faithful believers understood what was occurring to them, and that they were not fooled by the events around them. He wanted each person to know something crucial about themselves – as well as something that is true for all God's people.

The super-apostles and those who followed them would not stand. Rebellious Israel did not stand. God ensures the same is true throughout his church – even though the downfall of self-designated people may seem slow in coming. None of us will stand – no matter what our story – if we cease hearing God's word and listening to his Spirit (cf. Revelation 2, 3):

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind;
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of thy call,
As noiseless let thy blessing fall,
As fell thy manna down.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still small voice of calm!

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Paul was hopeful that his stern words would focus their hearts and minds on what he wanted to say about 'the table of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 10:14–22, 11:17ff), as well as concerning other matters. He wanted them to discover more of the true richness of being the body and bride of Christ, the Father's family, in whom they participated by the Holy Spirit.

We are called every day to consider afresh the apostle and high priest of our confession (Hebrews 3:1) who has come and tabernacled among us (John 1:1ff). What richer response can be ours than by affirming all these words by glorifying God with Mary, Jesus' mother, when she visited John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth? Mary's joy was in her Saviour-God's mercy towards

those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:46–53).

Same Spirit, same Lord, same God

1 Corinthians 12:1–7, 12, 13

Informed and understood

Paul paints a contrast in this chapter between their past lifestyles and their new life and identity in Christ. His letter so far has provided practical advice about living as God's people. Paul has reminded them of his first visit and has worked through a range of complex pastoral issues. In these next three chapters, he discusses the nature of their life together under God before describing victory over death and the establishment of God's kingdom.

Paul indicated that dumb idols let people live without constraint, thinking they can do and say what they please. That lack of restraint is the idols' attraction and seduction, and Paul had already warned that worshipping idols involves partnership with demons (1 Corinthians 10:14, 20). There is a great contrast between idolatry and the true worship of God where what is said is in the Spirit of God and declares 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Paul wanted them to see that in Christ they were not primarily given a new psychology, a new knowledge, a new culture or a new society. Their lives now flowed from God and not from themselves or the demons that 'enticed them and led them astray' (1 Corinthians 12:1–3).

Their new significance as citizens of Corinth was not even in their new way of life with its moral dignity and ethical lifestyle. Their fulfilment was in God. God was the one whose Holy Spirit revealed himself for everyone's benefit (1 Corinthians 12:3ff)! Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ was the one in whom they were many members serving each other. Jesus was the true servant (cf. Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). It was God the Father who activated all the gifts and services in everyone by the Holy Spirit and in Jesus Christ. The workings of the people of God in Corinth were God's business and the people of God there were God's household (1 Corinthians 8:6; cf. Luke 2:49)!

Their past and present

Paul wrote that the Corinthians previously did not know God and were not wise, powerful or noble by birth. They were weak in the world and despised (1 Corinthians 1:21, 26–28). Paul commented on their need to be careful about with whom they spent time (1 Corinthians 5:9–11), before reminding them of their previous lifestyles (1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

Paul warned that knowledge inflates egos while authentic love encourages and enriches (1 Corinthians 8:1–5). He also warned against worshipping idols and partnering with demons (1 Corinthians 10:14, 20).

Referring to their current relationships, Paul noted that there were quarrels, divisions and disagreements among them causing disunity (1 Corinthians 1:10–12), and that some of them were over-estimating their own wisdom (1 Corinthians 3:18). He implied that some were immature and were involved in sectarian leadership (1 Corinthians 2:1–4, 3:21).

Paul mentioned them participating in and tolerating immorality and described them as arrogant (1 Corinthians 5:1–2). They were taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 6:1) and were not treating each other well in family and public life (1 Corinthians 11:1ff, 20ff, 14:34).

Their present and future

When Paul said that he did not want them to be uninformed and ignorant about spiritual things, he was not just interested in their personal ministries, but in them knowing God and being aware of what God was doing!

Paul commenced his letter by referring to the grace of God given to them in Christ Jesus, and that they were enriched in speech and knowledge of the ‘testimony of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 1:6). They did not lack spiritual gifts and adequate spiritual strength was available so they could be blameless on the day of the Lord. God, Paul assured them, had been faithful in calling them into this fellowship of his Son, Christ Jesus our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:4–9).

They had been saved by the power of God in the message of the cross. God was the source of their life in Christ Jesus, and had given them wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:18, 30).

They had received the Spirit of God and so could ‘understand the gifts bestowed on us by God’ (1 Corinthians 2:12–15). They were God’s temple where God’s Spirit lived (1 Corinthians 3:16 cf. 6:19, 20). They celebrated ‘the festival’ as their Paschal Lamb, Christ Jesus, had been sacrificed (1 Corinthians 5:7, 8). They were washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

They knew that there was only one God, who is Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, and that everything is from and for the Father, through his Son (1 Corinthians 8:6). As God’s community, they shared the cup of the Lord, of blessing (and not cursing). They ate one bread together, representing Christ’s sacrifice of himself, and proclaimed the Lord’s death until he comes again (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17, 11:17–34, cf. 15:1ff).

Unity and diversity

Paul used the diversity in their human bodies to explain their membership of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12). It was in one Spirit that they were all baptised (by the Father) into Christ. It was God the Father who made them all drink of the one Spirit. We are to see that the ‘same’ and the ‘varieties’ of 1 Corinthians 12:4–6

relate to the nature of the triune God, and God's unity and differentiations. What is eternally so in the unity of the Father and the Son and the Spirit was what was at that time and in that location revealed in the life of the Corinthian church! That was their all! God had activated *all* the gifts and services among everyone in the community! The gifts that were given led to the actions that served. This is the way God – Father, Son and Spirit – is, and this became how they were personally and together!

All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Peter or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Corinthians 3:21–23).

We *are* the body of Christ, the Father's family, the community of the triune God: his Spirit is with us. In our lives together,

- the scandal of the cross is the source of our shared life. Its message is folly to those who are perishing, but to us it is God's power and wisdom.
- God's wisdom from before the ages is for our glory. We are yet to see the fullness of this glory, nonetheless the Spirit reveals these things to us from the depths of God and gives us 'the mind of Christ'.
- Our current life is not meaningless. Jesus has been raised as Lord and Christ and will hand the kingdom to the Father when all his enemies come under God's triune rule, secured in Jesus' death and resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The different gifts, services and activities from the one Spirit, Lord and God, are expressions of God's triune love. They flow to us from God's own being and secure us in knowing God – who fully knows us. This love of God for God's people, which flows from us back to God, abides forever. God's love never fails, even in the face of all evil and hatred.

God was in Christ

2 Corinthians 5:14–21

God was reconciling the world to himself

What did Paul mean by saying that God, the creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen,¹³ the

only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords ... who alone has immortality and [who] dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see

was in Christ, a man formed from the dust of the earth by being born of a woman (1 Timothy 6:15, 16)?

And what did Paul mean when he wrote that in Christ

all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19, 20)?

The Holy Spirit was in Christ

Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple were filled with God's glory. Jesus, commenting on the Jerusalem temple, spoke of his body being torn down and rebuilt in three days. His temple was the temple of the Holy Spirit, full of grace and truth. The angel had told Mary that God's Holy Spirit and the Most High's power would enable her to give birth to a holy child who would be known as God's Son (Luke 1:35).

The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove at his baptism. Peter later testified to Cornelius that Jesus of Nazareth was anointed Messiah by God's Holy Spirit to do good and to heal everyone who was oppressed because God's presence was with him (Acts 10:38).

The writer of the book of Hebrews stated that Jesus 'offered himself without blemish to God through the Holy Spirit', while Paul wrote that Jesus was 'declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (Hebrews 9:14; Romans 1:4).

The apostle John summed up the presence of the Holy Spirit with Jesus when he wrote that the Messiah-Son whom God sent shared God's messages 'for God gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34).

¹³ Cf. Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. *An Australian Prayer Book*, 26, 117, 118.

God the Father was in Christ

Jesus said to his disciples that those who had seen him had seen his heavenly Father. Jesus explained that was speaking to them in harmony with his Father and that he and his Father were working together. He asked them to believe that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:9–11, cf. 10:38).

Jesus prayed before his death that the world would believe that he had been sent by his Father and that his Father was in him and that he was in his Father (John 17:21–23).

Nothing could be more intimate than this mutual indwelling. Jesus earlier explained that he, as God's Son, could achieve nothing without his Father and only did what he saw his Father doing because

whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:19, 20).

This communion, this mutual relationship, was with a view to God fulfilling God's purposes in history, in God's people and in God's creation.

God the Son was Christ

Paul wrote to the Philippian church that it was because Messiah Jesus was 'in the form of God' that equality with God was not something to be exploited or grasped at. Being 'in the form of God' meant self-emptying and

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 2:5–8).

In addition to the witness of John's Gospel and the first letter of John to the person of Jesus as God's Word (John 1:1–14; 1 John 1:1ff; cf. Matthew 1:23; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:30–35), the writer of the book of Hebrews declared that God had recently spoken to God's people by God's Son.

God's Son, the author continued, perfectly reflected God's glory, exactly disclosed God's own being and 'sustains all things by his powerful word'. This emphasis was primary, as can be seen from the author's rhetorical questions about whether any angels had ever been told they were God's begotten Son, and that God would be their Father (Hebrews 1:2–5).

Pure communion; pure mission

God is never more God than in Jesus: God was in Christ. A human being is never more human than Jesus: God was in Christ. And God is still in Messiah Jesus since Jesus is 'seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens' (Hebrews 8:1, 1:3).

Our humanity is a mere shell unless God is in us. God has not fulfilled God's purposes in us until God's image is filled with God's-self (cf. Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:5ff; Acts 17:22–31). All true human hopes and all divine goals reach their great and glorious crescendo in Messiah Jesus: God was in Christ.

Pure communion is within the triune God, between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with their redeemed humanity. Divine fellowship embraced humanity in the person of Jesus: God was in Christ.

Where there is pure communion, there is pure mission. God being in Christ is a statement of God's mission. Paul's declaration that 'in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself' indicates the nature of this mission (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is not enough that God was in Christ – in Christ, God's purpose was to reconcile the world to God's-self.

We are not our true selves when we are cut off from God: we are 'without hope and without God in this world' (Ephesians 2:12 NIV). God's person and purposes are attacked by our being cut off from God:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have left undone the things that we ought to have done, and done the things we ought not to have done.¹⁴

The prophets declared that those who sin will die when they come under God's judgements without God's salvation (Jeremiah 31:30; cf. Ezekiel 18:4, 20; John 8:24). There is no basis for resenting that we are victims because of our society, parental upbringing, genetic makeup or the circumstances in which we find ourselves.¹⁵

God did not endorse the proverb that 'the parents have eaten sour grapes, and therefore the children's teeth are set on edge' (Ezekiel 18:1–4, Jeremiah 31:29–30). The prophetic message was that there may be faithful parents and rebellious children, and vice-versa. God does not negotiate with evil – that is evil's surest judgement (Ezekiel 18:30, 33:20).

In what ways is this impasse broken? In what ways are we rescued? The answer is that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19). Paul's testimony about families and communities in Ephesians 5:21–6:9 sought to identify and resolve the impasses that can exist between people, and between humanity and God.

¹⁴ Ibid. 20.

¹⁵ There is a difference between resenting and, by contrast, recognising and responding appropriately to victim-situations and virtue-signalling by connecting with suitable communities and resources that address difficult, demeaning and denigrating circumstances.

On what other basis could God urge the people in Ezekiel's time to heed the prophet's command to turn away from transgressions and gain new hearts and new spirits so that they would avoid being ruined by iniquity:

For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live (Ezekiel 18:30–32).

God is making his appeal through us

Paul testified that Christ's love motivated him because he was convinced that Jesus Christ's love was for everyone's advantage:

And [Christ Jesus] died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

Paul explained that Jesus was without sin but for our benefit was made 'to be sin' so that in Jesus as Messiah we 'might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:14–21).

Paul's letter to Timothy asserts that God wants everyone to be saved and to know the truth that there is one God, and that Jesus Christ 'gave himself' as a ransom for everyone as the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:4).

Peter wrote that God was patient, 'not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 18:32). God's delight is in God's beloved Son whose death 'abolished death and brought immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Timothy 1:10).

Paul's cry: 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?' (1 Corinthians 15:55) is a reminder that Christ is living and not with the dead, as the angel reminded the disciples at the empty tomb (Luke 24:5).

As P. T. Forsyth wrote:

Christ did, at the depth of that great act of self-identification with us when He became man, He did enter the sphere of sin's penalty and the horror of sin's curse, in order that, from the very midst and depth of it, His confession and praise of God's holiness might rise like a spring of fresh water at the bottom of a bitter sea, and sweeten all. ... God was in Christ reconciling, not through Christ, but actually present as Christ reconciling, doing in Christ his own work of reconciliation. [This reconciliation] was done by the Godhead himself, and not by the Son alone.¹⁶

This description aligns with Paul's testimony that God's new creation which God is accomplishing by reconciling us to God's-self in Jesus Christ results in us being sent by God to minister this reconciliation in the world:

¹⁶ P. T. Forsyth, *Work of Christ, The* (London, UK: Independent Press, 1938), 147, 148, 152.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

There is no room here for mere human opinions. We are new creations in Christ, we are in communion with the triune God, and we are in and on his mission. God makes his appeal through us from within us! We are embraced into God's communion with Christ and in mission in God. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We are urged to live reconciled to God, and to be 'ambassadors for Christ' in the family and social relationships in which we participate. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, and giving us the message of reconciliation. As Jesus declared: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God' (Matthew 5:9).

Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:14–21

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

Let us unpack this statement in several stages:

God was reconciling the world

Paul was not saying that the world was reconciling itself by itself. God's reconciliation is not an amelioration or a diversion but an actual reconciliation. God's reconciliation is not according to fallen human politics and patterns, or fickle ambitions and aspirations.

Paul was also not saying that God was reconciling the world to itself. That is a helpful consequence of God's reconciliation, but God's reconciliation is of a completely different quality.

God was reconciling the world to himself

Reconciling the world to itself would be miracle enough, but Paul was saying that the world is reconciled to God. The world is brought back to true communion with its creator, into the life, love and liberty of the triune God.

Reconciliation is God's action at God's initiative. It flows freely from God to the world, and then works in the world to draw the world back to God. God's riches, wisdom and knowledge are unsearchable. God's purposive giving is that 'from him and through him and to him are all things' (Romans 11:36).

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself

God is not, however, acting 'out of the blue'. Neither is God just working with and alongside creation and humanity to bring this reconciliation to pass. Paul declared that 'all this [new creation by which everything old passes away and becomes new] is from God' and then asserted that God has 'reconciled us to himself *through Christ*' (2 Corinthians 5:18, italics added).

There is no divine plan – indeed there is no possibility of reconciliation – other than through Jesus Christ. All evidence of valid human reconciliation owes its final debt to Jesus Christ – and to God's work through and in him.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

Paul's full statement is richer still: God the Father, Son and Spirit in all their trinitarian fullness are present in Christ. Jesus is not simply the one through whom God works; he is the one in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:19).

This must mean that all the richness and all the riches of the communion, harmony, joy, purity and love shared in the Godhead dwells in Christ. It means

that there is nothing of God 'left behind' when God brings reconciliation in Christ. Reconciliation is more than a divine and human union in Christ's humanity. It depends on what God does in dwelling in Christ, and specifically on what God does at the cross.

Paul expanded his statement to the Corinthians when writing to the Colossians, noting that 'through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:20).

Paul made it clear that God does not count our trespasses against us (2 Corinthians 5:19). It is crucified love that effects reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, 21). Paul was convinced that it was Jesus Christ's love that has so radically changed the human situation.

Paul stated this same thought in Colossians 1:21, 22:

you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church of Christ Jesus eliminating barriers between estranged nations by shedding his blood in his peace-bringing peaceful response to the violating violence that crucified and killed him. Christ Jesus was in this way creating 'in himself one new humanity' that through him has 'access in one Spirit to the Father' (Ephesians 2:13–18).

These passages speak of the fruits of this great reconciliation, of our not living for ourselves, of our becoming the righteousness of God, of our being presented holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, and of our having access in one Holy Spirit to God the Father through Jesus Christ.

The message of reconciliation

We may be inclined to abandon our efforts at reconciliation and to mock other peoples' efforts if we misunderstand the meaning and impact of reconciliation being God's initiative and action. But the reality is as Jesus said: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' (Matthew 5:9).

We are taken into communion and union, and so reconciled to God in order that we may know the fullness of outward-looking trinitarian action: that same action which achieved our reconciliation. We are to share in God's triune vocation, to live in his mission, and to be so urged on by the love of Christ that others become new creations and so also share in God's reconciliation.

This sharing in reconciliation results in us becoming the righteousness of God together. We are entrusted with God's own message of reconciliation. We are more than mere messengers through whom the message is conveyed, we are living

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

evidence of God's reconciling work, of God's plan for God's creation – of God's plan to reconcile all things to God's-self (2 Corinthians 5:14, 19–21).

This participation is further explained in 2 Corinthians 6:3–13 where Paul describes his life and ministry as God's servant. His sufferings and successes testify to his open-hearted sharing with them – and as such are God's appeal in and through him to them (2 Corinthians 5:19–21).

God's reconciliation establishes God's new creation where we commune with and in the triune God, and as new creations we now live in and share in God's mission. The true temple of the living God is filled with joy and appreciation for God's gracious and merciful love and holiness. God's people are Christ's ambassadors, with God appealing to all humanity – especially God's own ambassadors – to be reconciled to God and so to each other.

Paul's exhortations about reconciliation were on Christ's behalf. He made them because of God's promises to 'live in them and walk among them', to be their God and have them as God's people, and to care for them as God's family (2 Corinthians 5:20, 6:16–18).

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1).

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:10, 11).

Now is the day of salvation

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

An acceptable time – a time of favour

Paul quoted from Isaiah concerning God bringing his people home from other lands where they went as exiles and captives:

In a time of favour I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages (Isaiah 49:8ff).

The whole creation is described as responding with delight at the LORD's care for his people:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones (Isaiah 49:13).

Prior to his quote from Isaiah, Paul wrote of those in Christ being new creations as the result of God, in Christ, reconciling everything to God's-self (2 Corinthians 5:17ff). It is in this context that Paul urged the Corinthians 'not to accept the grace of God in vain' (2 Corinthians 6:1). The 'acceptable time' is the time of God's grace and favour – *the day of salvation* – the time when God listens to and answers cries for help and mercy.

A full acceptance of grace

To receive grace in an empty way is to ignore God's saving action. To accept that today is salvation's day is to live in these realities and fully accept grace.

Every day is *a day of salvation*. God, in and through Christ, and consequently in and through his people, has salvation and reconciliation as the goal and focus of his love (2 Corinthians 5:11–6:2).

Paul consistently linked his goal of sharing in this divine plan as an ambassador for Christ with God's action in Christ, and with the welfare of the Corinthian believers. He tried to persuade others aware of the importance of being in awe of God-in-Christ and of the significance of having shared himself with them: 'I hope that we are also well known to your consciences' (2 Corinthians 5:11).

In addition to wanting to convince other people because of his reverence and respect for the Lord Jesus, Paul was motivated by Christ Jesus' sacrificial love in dying for all humanity so that everyone who lived because they believed in Jesus would not be self-absorbed but live 'for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

Paul then emphasised that he – and everyone in God's community – were not only reconciled to God through Christ Jesus but had been assigned personal ministries

of reconciliation. These ministries are the way that God-in-Christ is reconciling everything to God's-self. They are the way God-in-Christ reveals that blame-and-shame are absent from God's reconciliatory purposes:

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:18–21).

The day of salvation

The day of salvation was the day Christ died. God dealt with sin and heralded a new creation in Christ's death on the cross. Christ's incarnation was *the day of salvation* as it heralded this *day* (Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:68ff; John 1:35).

The day of salvation was the day Paul was converted on the way to Damascus. Paul was a new creation in Christ, reconciled to God that he might be God's righteousness (Acts 9:1ff, 22:6ff, 26:12ff).

The day of salvation was the day the Corinthians received (and *the day* when those to whom they went received) the gospel. God made them Christ's ambassadors, to tell, be and live this message, not as perfectionists but as living witnesses to its truth (2 Corinthians 6:3ff); working with God as God's servants and ambassadors.

The day of salvation was the day we received (and *the day* when those to whom we go receive) the gospel and become God's righteousness:

Oh Christ our conquering king,
Our hearts of love implore,
That we may be your messengers
To every shore,
To every place,
To bring your grace and save our race
For evermore.¹⁷

Hearts wide open

We are not grace's destiny: grace is to flow through us to and for other people – and so to even more people through those who receive it, otherwise grace would have never reached us! Just as God's heart is wide open to us in Christ, and we are to open our hearts to God in Christ, so are we to open our hearts to other people and urge them to receive the fullness of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This reception will bring them to open their hearts to other people in turn, and so result in them

¹⁷ *New Creation Hymn Book*, (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>, 2010), 119. See also 'New Creation Publications Inc. Archive,' New Creation Publications Inc., <https://geoffreybingham.com/2019/03/12/download-the-new-creation-archive/>.

participating with us in God's intention to reconcile the world to himself, and so continue to fulfil his word that *today is salvation's day* (cf. Psalm 118:19–24)!

We are to place no obstacle in other people's way in sharing this message. We are not to regard anyone from a fallen human viewpoint. We are in Christ. It is God's love, God's message of reconciliation, God's grace, God's *day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 5:14ff)! So, with Paul, in God in Christ we are to commend ourselves in every way (2 Corinthians 6:3–10):

- 'through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger'. Christ was rejected, and we should beware lest we reject him and his message. We are to recognise both the fact of rejection for Christ, Paul and all God's people, as well as God's purposes (Isaiah 49:1–6).
- 'by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for [both hands]; in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute'.

To be saved is to avoid anything that is unclean and to avoid being with unrepentant evildoers. It is to be God's living temple. True proclamation is true living worship. It means not being wrongly aligned with those who oppose God's salvation in Christ. True contact with the world and love for those to whom we relate means complete separation from evil and idolatry as well as full identification with everyone as people like us (2 Corinthians 6:14ff)!

We live in an apparent contradiction:

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Corinthians 6:8–10).

Anything less than this empties grace and denies today as *the day of salvation* (cf. Psalm 118:19–29; Luke 19:28–48). We can abundantly and fully accept God's favour in Christ and enjoy a rich entry into God's presence as God's people – welcomed by God into God's family (2 Corinthians 6:14–18). We are the recipients of amazing promises, promises that when contemplated carefully can motivate us to grow in purity and holiness and to live in awe of God's person and actions in us, in all humanity and throughout God's creation (2 Corinthians 7:1).

I have been crucified with Christ

Galatians 2:15–21

No one will be justified by the works of the law

What were the works of the law for? They were the expression of a life lived in the redemption God had given (Deuteronomy 30:11ff). Using the works of the law as a means of self-justification denies the grace of God and rejects our need for redemption by anyone other than ourselves, if we need it at all. This was Cain's problem. He determined that the serpent's head would be crushed by his own efforts and that righteousness would come to him by his sacrifice.

God pointed out to him that a sacrifice was needed, not to appease an innately angry God, but because the wrath of God in the lives of angry humanity would come upon another seed of woman than Cain – a seed who would not be destroyed by evil, but who would defeat evil.¹⁸ No sacrifice that we offer can provide the redemption that the law demanded.

We are justified by faith in Christ Jesus

Abel was not justified by his sacrifice but by the faith that his action expressed. We are not justified by the works we do when the Spirit is in us! We are justified by the work of the Spirit in Jesus – by Christ Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. It was in *this* faith that Abel 'received approval as righteous', and it was *this* faith that lifted Abel's countenance up (Hebrews 11:4). Faith in Christ Jesus means trusting and believing that Jesus died the death demanded of sinners by the law. Sin dominates the sinner, and only God's gift of his Son can remove it. Jesus' death satisfies the law, the human conscience, and expresses God's redemptive purposes.

This divine love answers sinners' needs. It is God's righteousness that brings 'me out of trouble' under the leadership of 'your good spirit'. That God is faithful to anyone when 'no one living is righteous before you' can only mean that Christ's death is *for* me and credited *to* me (Psalm 143:2, 7–11).

The law shows that the door is closed on any other way of living 'to God' than that opened by faith in Christ Jesus – by the faithfulness of Christ Jesus (Galatians 2:19; cf. John 10:1ff). We are 'justified by faith in Christ'; by trusting that Jesus did what we would not and could not do (Galatians 2:16, 3:22, 23). Our inability was because we were dead to that which was true life – we were not able to keep the law (cf. Psalm 1).

¹⁸ Divine wrath is God's peaceful, non-violent, insistence on remaining pure, holy, loving, good, gracious and merciful when faced with human rebellion, rejection, hostility and evil. The impact of God's wrath on human defiance and deviance is borne in the conscience and seen in the belligerence directed at other people, creatures and the world in which we live. Understanding God's actions in history is not then a matter of thinking about God's grace and God's wrath, but of welcoming and sharing God's grace and so being released from self-justification!

Christ's love in the life we now live

Christ Jesus was crucified by sinners, with us so easily being one with them in hating God. Jesus 'bore our sins in his body on the cross' (1 Peter 2:24). When Jesus died – at humanity's hands – we died. His death showed the futility of all other sacrifices. His death profiles anyone offering sacrifices: either their anger at their failure or their hope for their salvation (cf. Luke 18:9–14).

When Paul wrote, 'I have been crucified with Christ' he spoke of his – and so of our – justification. He was saying that the cross of Jesus not only ended every effort towards self-justification and self-righteousness, it was there that the Holy One embraced all sinners together in himself to stand under the judgement of God and discover that God's gifts of grace and mercy were God's verdict. Jesus did not retreat from the filth of humanity as judgement came, but took depravity, degradation and deprivation into himself by being *with* humanity. God's response by self-giving love and holiness, righteousness and goodness, truth and faithfulness contrasted the defiant selfish actions of evil. Jesus died knowing that his holy and loving vocation was to so destroy evil that sinners could live; and could live forever. Because he hung on to us into death, we can embrace him into life!

We died in his death and so he now lives in us. He took us into his humanity so that he could give us his humanity. This living of Christ in us is our life:

I now live ... by faith in [*or* by the faithfulness of] the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19, 20).

There is no other life; all other life is extinguished as a means of providing the conscience with hope and peace. To deny this truth is to 'nullify the grace of God' and to declare that 'Christ died for nothing'. To trust God is to know that just as he has been faithful in the judgements, so he is faithful to the end of the ages:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything (Galatians 6:14, 15)!

The promise to Abraham

Galatians 3:1–18

Law as a way of justification and life

Paul, in contrasting the law and the gospel, reminded the Galatians that they received the Spirit by believing the proclamation they heard of Christ crucified. Paul asked whether God miraculously sustained them by continually supplying the Spirit to them because of their legalism, or because they believed the good news to which they listened (Galatians 3:5). Their new life was a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham, who was reckoned righteous by believing God. God's promise to bless the nations in Abraham meant they – and we – would be 'blessed with Abraham' and reckoned righteous by faith in God (Galatians 3:9). This justification by faith was 'declared [to Abraham as] the gospel beforehand' (Galatians 3:8).

Paul's reasoning was based on reading Genesis, where God told Abram that he, God, would bless him, and that in Abram all the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12). The evidence of this blessing was to be in Abram's innumerable descendants and in his possessing the promised land (Genesis 15). The basis for and substance of this blessing was God's gift of righteousness. Abraham's true descendants are those that live in this righteousness. Their new life is not measured by their own goals, expectations and analyses: they are not justified by what they have done. Works justification does not work, because 'all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse' (Galatians 3:10; cf. Deuteronomy 27:26). The law, and any law-system, can never justify anyone before God (Galatians 3:11, 12). The order in works justification is wrong: obedience to the law does not lead to justification before God; justification before God brings obedience to the law.

Contrary to the perspective of Paul's legalistic contemporaries, the law never taught justification by works! Obedience to the ten words or commandments was always to occur as their response to God bringing them out of bondage and slavery in Egypt (cf. Exodus 19:4). They were to obey the law as they lived in the presence of the LORD, knowing that they would learn much about God's presence as they kept God's law! God giving them the law was an act of unconditional grace, to be received by faith (Galatians 3:11; cf. Romans 1:17). It was also a promise that by this grace, God would be present *to* them by being *with* them and that they would be God's people and reach God's spiritual-relational and physical destinations.

This divinely promised grace was the basis on which they were to keep God's ten words and other instructions. The nominated blessings and curses described what would happen as they obeyed or rebelled against God. They were not prescriptions about how they could be accepted by God and they were not a dualistic binary analysis of good and evil.

The golden-calf crisis, where the Israelites sought to abandon God's presence because they thought Moses and God had abandoned them, illustrated this dynamic reality (Exodus 32–34). Their calf celebrated their new understanding of the LORD. Moses' smashing of the two stone tables expressed Moses' grasp of what they had done. Not living in God's presence meant rejecting God's grace, God's law and God's promise of life in God's promised land.

The order in Exodus 33:12ff is God's grace, God's presence, God's law and ways, and God's sabbath rest. This was what would make them distinct 'from every people on the face of the earth' and enable them to be the priestly people through whom the Abrahamic blessings would come to the nations.

In Exodus 19:4–6 the order is the same:

- 'I bore you on eagles' wings' indicated grace.
- 'and brought you to myself' indicated grace then presence.
- 'if you obey my voice and keep my covenant' indicated their intended response to grace then presence.
- 'you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' indicated God's promised blessings!

Christ as our justification and life

The Galatians became Christians when they received the Holy Spirit by believing the proclamation that they heard of Jesus Christ crucified. They miraculously continued as Christians as God supplied the Holy Spirit who sustained them. Christ redeemed them from the curse of the law as a means of justification by becoming curse for them (cf. Genesis 12:3).

Jesus Christ has borne the curse of our futile efforts to justify ourselves. His redemption is in order that every nation, along with the Jews, might receive the blessing of justification by faith and the promise of the Spirit. These are our inheritance in Abraham's offspring, Jesus Christ. Note again the order:

- Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law.
- We receive in Christ the blessing promised to Abraham: our receiving justification and the Spirit through faith.

The rest of the letter to the Galatians details some of the imperatives of grace. Galatians 5:1ff urged them to stand firm, Galatians 5:13ff called on them to love their neighbours, and Galatians 5:16ff commanded them to live by, and be led by, the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit of God's grace express the whole law (cf. Galatians 5:22, 23), while the responses of grace are described in Galatians 6:1–10. Restoration comes from 'a spirit of gentleness' and humility. People bear each other's burdens, test 'their own work', and carry 'their own loads'. Those 'who are taught the word' readily 'share in all good things with their teacher' and eternal

life is harvested by sowing to the Holy Spirit. Paul's encouragement was that they did

not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Life in the Father, Son and Spirit

This pattern of life has nothing to boast about except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:11–18). Those who live this way are new creations and know the grace, mercy and peace of God the Father, Jesus Christ his Son, and the Holy Spirit. These new creations are no longer enslaved to the spirituality and mind set of the world and under the condemnation of the law (Galatians 4:3–8). Their life is in the triune God. They have been adopted as God's children, and God has sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts. They have, in Christ, received God's inheritance, namely, the fulfilment of all God's promises. Such treasures cannot be locked up, but overflow despite and through suffering to all humanity, re-creating humanity and God's world by God's great grace and mercy.

Sarah and the promises of God

Galatians 4:21–5:1

God's promises to Abram and Sarai

Abram was obeying the LORD and awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises when he left Haran with Sarah and his brother's son, Lot. God's promises related to God blessing him with a new homeland and an abundant family. These blessings meant that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abram (Genesis 11:27–12:3).

Later, God reaffirmed his promise to Abram after Lot chose to live on the plains and Abram went to live in the hills (Genesis 13:14–18). Having rescued Lot and other people groups from invading rulers, Abram was met by Melchizedek, 'a priest of God Most High' (Genesis 14:17–22). God spoke to Abram again, declaring himself as Abram's shield and reward. Abram asked God concerning his lack of an heir and was told that he would be given a son. God then made a covenant with Abram in which he described the promises of chapters 12:1ff and 13:14ff in more detail (Genesis 15:1–21).

The slave woman and the free woman

Abram and Sarai acted according to their own fallen logic by exploiting Hagar and attempting to fulfil God's promises that they would have a son (Genesis 16:1–15). Paul argued that God's promises to them were not realised through Ishmael as Hagar was a slave and not a free woman (Galatians 4:21–5:1; cf. Genesis 21:8–20).¹⁹

This made Abraham's treatment of Sarah with Pharaoh and Abimelech more tragic (Genesis 12:10–20, 20:1–18). Sarah, 'the daughter of my father, but not of my mother', was *his* wife (Genesis 20:12). She was the mother of the faithful nations who would be the fruit of God's promises to Abraham. She 'corresponds to the Jerusalem above'. Sarah is therefore a new Eve, the 'mother of all living' by faith (Galatians 4:26–31; Genesis 3:20).

Just as Abram's name of exalted father was changed to reveal that his exaltation would be as the father of a multitude of nations (Abraham), so Sarah was no longer a princess (Sarai) but a noblewoman (Sarah) (Genesis 17:5, 15). Her infertility

¹⁹ The power hierarchies evident in Abraham's treatment of Sarah and Sarah's of Hagar need careful consideration in the light of God's concern for Hagar and Ishmael ('And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is"') and Paul's declaration about Abraham's offspring, especially given the way these stories are told to explain narratives about God's people (Genesis 21:8–20; Galatians 3:28–29). Paul's account about Peter at Antioch in Galatians 2:11–14 and Israel's experience of slavery provide lenses through which to read these stories.

was discussed by God on two occasions, one of which exposed Sarah's disbelief that God could give her a son (Genesis 17:15–22, 18:1–15).

God's promises will be fulfilled

The birth of Isaac, with Sarah's delight and Abraham's obedience, demonstrated the certainty that God's covenant purposes and promises would be fulfilled (Genesis 21:1–7). God's inheritance belongs to the diverse people of God and not to any unique nation.

Abraham purchased land from the Hittites after Sarah died. They recognised him as a significant person and transferred ownership to him, giving him his first land title among them. Sarah had died before this part of God's covenant promise was even partially fulfilled (Genesis 23:1–20).

Children of the promise

Paul declared that Sarah and Hagar 'are two covenants'. Hagar corresponds to the present Jerusalem and slavery to the law while Sarah corresponds to the Jerusalem above and freedom in the promises of God. Hagar had children according to the flesh and Sarah according to the Spirit – with the Spirit's children outnumbering those of the desolate woman (Galatians 4:21–5:1; cf. Isaiah 54:1ff; Hosea 2:23).

Paul was quite clear, we 'are the children of the promise, like Isaac' (Galatians 4:28). We receive the inheritance of Abraham, through Christ, who has set us free. Christ Jesus has removed the curses of the law and of those who have cursed Abraham 'in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [including Hagar's descendants], so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Galatians 3:6–14, cf. 3:27, 28).

Paul must have had this in mind when he went on to speak of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–26). This fruit is the inheritance promised to Abraham and the fulfillment of God's promises. It leaves nothing to boast in 'except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world'. The 'new creation is everything' because of Christ's cross (Galatians 6:14, 15).

We call God 'Abba, Father' because he has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. Slavery is over, and we are heirs, through God, of all the liberty that belongs to his redeemed, justified family (Galatians 4:4–6; Hebrews 11:8–19).

This is good news for people who, like Hagar and Ishmael, are marginalised and excluded by those who have received God's promises that being baptised into and clothed with Christ meant that there is *no longer Hagar or Sarah* for

you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:27–29, altered; cf. Genesis 21:17).

In him you also Ephesians 1:1–23

You also

Paul repeatedly refers to *you*, *us* and himself in the first three chapters of this letter. He distinguishes between Gentiles and ‘the commonwealth of Israel’ (Ephesians 2:12). He also distinguishes himself from those to whom he wrote – for whom he saw his sufferings as their glory – as ‘a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles’, as ‘an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God’ and as ‘the least of all the saints’ (Ephesians 1:1, 3:1, 8, 13).

Whilst *we* and *us* in Ephesians 1:3–11 includes everyone in Ephesus who was ‘faithful in Christ Jesus’, he explained that *we* were those ‘who were the first to set our hope on Christ’. Paul indicated that God’s plan and purpose in Christ was that everyone – *we* and *you also* – ‘might live to the praise of his glory’ (Ephesians 1:1, 12–18).

The same twofold situation occurs in Ephesians 2:1ff, 2:11ff and 3:1ff, as well as in the introduction. The second half of Ephesians expresses his current apostolic ministry to them, based on this careful presentation of his unity with them in the ‘God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ’, namely ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Ephesians 1:2, 3).

In him

Ephesians 1:13–14 provides a helpful window into Paul’s letter. All that he has to say is *in Christ Jesus*. All God’s blessings, all God’s election, and all God’s love are *in Christ*. All the holiness and blamelessness that are given in our adoption as God’s children, all that is ours ‘according to the pleasure’ of the will of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is *in Christ*. All that God has planned for the fullness of time, all that is involved in our being God’s heritage – and receiving God’s inheritance – is *in Christ*.

‘In him you also ...’ (Ephesians 1:13). Whatever is in Christ, and so which applied to the apostle and to the Jews who first heard the gospel, was also true for every Ephesian believer, and hence remains true for us! Paul’s message was that God had planned for us to live to the praise of his glory and his glorious grace! This may encourage us to exalt in what Christ has done for us and to praise God for who Christ Jesus is (cf. Ephesians 5:14).

Two important points mentioned in these verses include that:

- They had ‘heard the word of truth’, the good news that had saved them, and they had believed in Christ. To hear this gospel is to believe in Christ – to believe in Christ is to hear the gospel.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

The Father's good pleasure was presented in Christ. God's delight is to accomplish his plan in Christ. What is even more remarkable is that he has made known to his people the 'mystery of his will' – and that this revelation which comes 'in all wisdom and insight' is God's 'good pleasure' (Ephesians 1:5, 8–10). It does not so much come *with* or *from* Christ. It *is* Christ!

The Ephesians believed Christ when they 'heard the word of truth'. The mystery of God's will *is* God's Son! Paul wrote of the mystery of Christ and the way it was revealed to him, just as it was now being revealed to God's 'holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit' (Ephesians 3:2–6).

- They 'were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit'. Being marked and sealed and receiving the promised Holy Spirit guaranteed the inheritance that comes with their being God's redeemed people. This inheritance relates to 'receiving every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' – with the Holy Spirit being the fullness and substance of all God's gifts (Ephesians 1:3).

We come to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, whether Jews and Gentiles, whether far away or nearby (Ephesians 2:17, 18). It is the Holy Spirit who strengthens 'our inner being' as Christ dwells 'in our hearts through faith' (Ephesians 3:16, 17).

It is the Holy Spirit who reveals 'the mystery of Christ' to humanity (Ephesians 1:9, 3:5). This mystery is that all believers, whether Gentile or Jew, belong to Christ, and so are also heirs and 'sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (Ephesians 3:5, 6).

To the praise of the Father of glory

Paul wrote that this message testifies to all creation about the mystery of God that is revealed as 'the news of the boundless riches of Christ' and that is implemented according to 'the eternal purpose' that God achieved in the Lord Jesus Christ. God's 'boundless riches' are ours in the Spirit, and so we need not lose heart in our sufferings. God the Father, through God's Spirit and by Christ indwelling our 'hearts through faith', will accomplish 'far more than all we can ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3:8–11, 14–20)!

No wonder Paul prayed for the Ephesians, giving thanks for their 'faith in the Lord Jesus and [their] love toward all the saints'. No wonder Paul referred to the 'God of our Lord Jesus Christ' as the 'Father of glory', and prayed that as they came to know God, God would give them spiritual wisdom and revelation to enlighten them about the hope to which God had called them. This hope was 'the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ... the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe' and was 'according to the working of his great power' (Ephesians 1:15–19).

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

Three themes have been briefly explored. Firstly, God's mystery is Christ, what God is doing in him and with him in the Spirit. Secondly, in Christ this mystery is revealed, and we will never know Christ Jesus or his Father's plan unless we hear this word and receive God's Spirit. And thirdly, those who believe have heard! They have received God's Spirit and are heirs in God's family!

What remains to be said? Just to affirm that our redemption and forgiveness are 'through his blood' (Ephesians 1:6). Christ is Lord of all because God raised him from the dead and placed him above all authorities and powers for the church (Ephesians 1:20, 21). That surely provokes a full benediction that takes all our lives to even begin to express (Ephesians 3:14–21).

A new humanity

Ephesians 2:1–22

God's works – not ours

Paul outlined aspects of the way we were, and, of ourselves, still are! He began by saying to his readers that they were dead to the life of blessings and abundance in which God's grace and delight would be known, and which would be informed by God's generously given wisdom and insights.

Living this deathly existence aligned to the worldly and spiritual powers working among and in those who disobey God's plans and purposes was not unique to the non-Jewish nations. Paul emphasised that fleshly passions and sensuality – and the consuming anger that resulted – included everyone from every nation (Ephesians 2:3).²⁰ Paul added later that non-Jewish peoples lacked Messiah's blessings as they were estranged from 'the commonwealth of Israel' and its covenant promises; they were consequently without 'hope and without God in the world' (Ephesians 2:12).

Paul outlined that God's response to this human crisis was in God's rich mercy and that God had acted 'out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses' and had 'made us alive together with Christ'. God's saving grace has resurrected us with Christ Jesus and secured us in the heavenly realms with him (where we are no longer dominated or demeaned by the evil spiritual powers earlier mentioned)

so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–7).

Paul emphasised that they were saved by God's gift, 'by grace ... through faith'. Their rescue from living-death was not accomplished by their own efforts and achievements, removing any basis in their ability to boast or brag about their self-entitlement or self-virtue (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Paul concluded this section of his letter with the result of God's breakthrough reviving action:

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:10).

Our true destiny was only ever in Christ. He, thankfully, destroys dead works. We are made alive in his resurrection as testimony not only to God's refusal to sanction dead works, but as evidence of God's personal kindness to deceived, defiant and decadent humanity!²¹

²⁰ Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past (Ephesians 2:3 KJV).

²¹ God's refusal to sanction dead works is God's personal kindness. God's kindness in refusing to endorse evil is experienced by rebellious humanity as God's wrath (cf. Ephesians 2:3).

A new humanity

This new humanity is all of grace

This new humanity flows from God's great love for humanity, expressed in the death and resurrection of his Son. This divine love of the Father, Son and Spirit for rebellious humanity is revealed as and in God's grace and mercy. God gives without compromising his own holiness, purity and beauty. This action of divine goodness and glory is redemptive and restorative and is revealed as and in God's grace and mercy.

God's act of new creation – not from nothing, but from 'children of wrath' – is completely God's act. We are what he has made us to be, to do what he has given us to do, not as puppets but as persons with purpose and promise (Ephesians 2:3, 10)!

This new humanity is personal and communal, not private or individual

This new humanity is the true 'commonwealth of Israel', the fulfilment of the promises in the covenants given to God's people. God's people 'have been brought near by the blood of Christ' (Ephesians 2:12, 13). This rich community-in-communion replaces fallen religious, social and political systems and knows peace where wrath and hostility dominated.

Peace comes by Christ reconciling humanity to God – and *therefore* to each other! Christ does this in his death on the cross. All Paul's proclamation concerns Christ's death and resurrection. Paul declared that all who are raised with Christ 'have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Ephesians 2:18).

Reconciliation embraces us together in this community and communion of God the Father, Jesus Christ his Son and the Holy Spirit. We learn that 'we are what he has made us' and overflow with the 'good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Ephesians 2:10).

God does this not only to show us his goodness and kindness, but to reveal his holiness, love, mercy and grace – to show himself to all creation as giver and forgiver. This revelation leads to the final demise of all the spirits that work in those who are disobedient. There is no life to give, no freedom to bestow, no vocation to facilitate, no family to enrich and no eternity to promise outside of God's creational and redemptive goodness and mercy.

The new humanity is God's dwelling place

God's people now dwell in him. This indwelling is mutual: we are now in this divine community; God fills us as his people. Paul declared that they were 'citizens with the saints', 'members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone', and 'a holy temple in the Lord' in whom 'the whole structure is joined together and

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

grows'. Paul's climactic pronouncement was that they were 'built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God' (Ephesians 2:19–22)!

It is as if this passage is a commentary on Isaiah 26. Those who trust the LORD with a steadfast mind know peace. They know that God ordains peace for them, 'for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us'. They know this peace even though they have been ruled by other lords – lords who bring death and destruction as they promise lofty cities and material luxury.

They know that God's judgements are sure, that God is against those who are entitled and arrogant and in favour of those who are impoverished and needy and who hunger and thirst for righteousness (cf. Matthew 5:1ff; Luke 1:46ff, 67ff, 4:16ff). These are those who are God's true people, whom he increases and for whom he 'enlarges all the borders of the land' (Isaiah 26:15).

Paul's proclamation was one with the prophet's testimony:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead (Isaiah 26:19; cf. Ephesians 5:14).

Encouragement in Christ

Philippians 1:27–2:18

Living worthy of the gospel

Paul wrote about the Philippians' sufferings as well as about his own. He suffered not only because he was imprisoned, but because of ambitious and self-promoting preachers (Philippians 1:17). Paul's joy was that those around him knew he was imprisoned because of his witness to Jesus Christ even though he was suffering (Philippians 1:14).

Paul saw this as evidence of God's grace. He was confident 'that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ', and that the resulting gospel proclamation – even from wrong motives – was increasing while he was in prison (Philippians 1:6, 7, 12–18, 29, 30).

For Paul, 'living is Christ and dying is gain', and so he exhorted them to live in ways that were 'worthy of the gospel of Christ' and not be intimidated by their opponents (Philippians 1:21, 27, 28). Their standing firm, their 'striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel', their suffering and their salvation – like his – was primary 'God's doing' (Philippians 1:28–30).

If then there is any

Paul had written of his longing for them with 'the compassion of Christ Jesus' and the 'help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ' that he received in answer to their prayers (Philippians 1:8, 19). Paul's theology was no mere mental assent to formal doctrine! It was his life. He aimed to proclaim the gospel as a positive message that encouraged people and provided them with timely assistance.

The 'if then' in verse one is not hypothetical. It means since or therefore, and includes an exhortation to be persuaded, should anyone doubt what follows. The four 'any' statements in verse one form a cascading sequence. The first mentions Christ, the second points to God (the Father), while the third refers to the Spirit. The fourth encapsulates the previous three, referring to the compassion and sympathy that he has already attributed to Christ.

Philippian believers were to have the same mind, love and harmony as God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their unity of life centred on doing nothing 'from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility [regarding] others as better than yourselves'. It meant looking 'not to your own interests, but to the interests of others' (Philippians 2:1–5). This was not an idealist or pietistic principal to which they were to aspire, it is the life of God himself.

Encouragement in Christ

Paul believed there was *every* encouragement in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus for those suffering for their faith. Christ, being already in

the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited [*or* grasped], but emptied himself [*or* poured himself out], taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Jesus Christ was exalted because of his humility and obedience ‘to the point of death – even death on a cross’ (Philippians 2:6–11).

The encouragement that is in Christ is that God has exalted him as Lord. This does not simply mean defeating his enemies – even death – but, as Lord, helping suffering humanity. Paul’s readers were to be encouraged that Christ cared for them. Christ was not inward looking, but rather, in the mystery of divine grace, prioritised them ahead of himself; as worth dying for on a cross. His obedience to God was essential for their salvation. We see true humanity in all its fullness in this faithfulness to God – even as he suffered from the foolishness and vanity of those who crucified him.

Christ’s encouragement involves all that he does as comforter, advocate and intercessor. It relates to the work of the Holy Spirit as comforter, advocate and intercessor. Their ministry is vast and wonderful and in full accord with God’s plan for humanity and creation.

Consolation from love

This loving comfort and comforting love can be understood as referring to the love of God for humanity (cf. Romans 5:5–8, 8:28–39; 2 Corinthians 13:11–14; Ephesians 2:4; 2 Thessalonians 3:5). Consolation includes incentive and comfort. All that Christ did on earth, and all that he does now as ascended Lord of history, is in and flows from love. It was and is for his Father’s glory. His disregard for grasping or exploiting ‘equality with God’ expressed his and his Father’s love for fallen humanity (Philippians 2:6–11).

Christ came in God’s love and now brings sinful humanity into the comfort, consolation and incentive of that divine love. God’s people can now freely respond to the exhortation to consider the welfare of others ahead of their own, and to not live a conceited and selfish life with its own ambitions and pride. We can accept Paul’s advice that we are to

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13).

God’s love fills us with confidence that we, in and with Christ, can work for his glory and pleasure (Philippians 1:9–11).

Sharing in the Spirit

Paul wrote of the ‘help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ’ (Philippians 1:19). Whether this meant Christ’s own spirit or the Holy Spirit, the communion and unity of the

Godhead was present in Christ's humanity (cf. 2 Peter 1:3, 4). This spiritual help did not free the Christians at Philippi from suffering, even as it did not free Christ Jesus from suffering. Rather, they remained in the love and grace of God *because* of the help God gave them (Philippians 1:8, 19). Their help came from the Holy Spirit as they received and lived in the Spirit, under the Lordship of Christ who poured out the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:32–39).

Compassion and sympathy

Sharing in the Spirit also referred to their life together as a community of God's people. If all these things were true, how rich were their lives together? How wonderful to be in a community where the focus was on each other's welfare? How rich to belong to a gathering where this happens because those present share in the Spirit of the Father and of Christ who together love us and who encourage and enable us to live this way?

Complete my joy

How easily we can fool ourselves into thinking of God as dull and dreary! All the encouragement of Christ, all Christ's and the Father's love, all the sharing that is ours in the Spirit of love, all the compassion and sympathy that flow as God's people live together in him brings wonderful joy! Not only would Paul be filled with joy, so would the Philippian Christians (Philippians 2:17, 18)!

This joy flows from God's great joy, the great heavenly delight that accompanies repentance (Luke 15:7) to which Peter testified:

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).

Paul encouraged the Philippian believers that they shone 'like stars in the world' (Philippians 2:14, 15). While suffering, a wonderful witness occurred, however feeble they felt (cf. Romans 15:5, 6).

The mind of Christ

Philippians 2:1–13

Since

Paul first went to Philippi in response to a vision of a Macedonian man pleading with him to travel to Macedonia and help him (Acts 16:9–12).

He later wrote to the Philippian church that there is encouragement from being united with Christ, comfort in God's love, fellowship with God's Holy Spirit, and compassion and sympathy, presumably from God the Father through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Paul exhorted them to complete his joy by living with mutual love, in full harmony and with one mind (Philippians 2:2).

He was saying that his deepest joy would come from them having 'the same mind ... that was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5). Having the same mind meant living in God's love and being one in the Spirit of the Father and the Son. This would involve them not being self-centred or conceited. It meant being humble, highly regarding other people and being genuinely concerned for their welfare (Philippians 2:1–4).

Being one with Christ and having common understandings are key thoughts in this letter. Paul had just urged them to

live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that ... [he would] know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27).

He encouraged those who were mature to maintain one approach by exploring ways based on God's revelations in which their different perspectives could function harmoniously. He also urged Euodia and Syntyche 'to be of the same mind in the Lord' (Philippians 3:15, 4:2). Ending selfish ambition and vain conceit and considering others as better than ourselves involves giving priority to other people's interests and loving our neighbours as ourselves. Paul knew that living this way requires the attitude, approach or mind that he saw in Jesus.

Jesus, Paul wrote, was not exploiting but emptying, not grasping but giving, and not having but helping. This attitude was the essence of his incarnation. The exegesis or expression of his incarnation was seen in his crucifixion and death. Jesus 'humbled himself and became obedient unto death', so revealing the goal of his self-emptying, his 'taking the form of a slave' and his 'being born in human likeness' (Philippians 2:6–8; cf. Isaiah 53:12 where we read that the servant 'poured out his life unto death'. Paul may be referring to the same passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading (Acts 8:25–40)).

Therefore

Jesus Christ's action reaps a great harvest. God has exalted him above every name *because* of his humility in becoming 'obedient to the point of death' by crucifixion. His exaltation is

so that every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9–11).

Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead. He fulfils Isaiah 52:13–53:12 where God declared that his servant would act wisely, that he would be exalted, lifted up and powerful and that this would fill nations with awe since he was hideously disfigured in his sufferings and death.

Rulers will be silent because of what happened to him, 'for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate'. The prophet's affirmation was that God's servant's sufferings were redemptive and that his intercessory action was not his final ministry. Light would shine, knowledge would be learnt, satisfaction would occur, and prosperity would flourish

because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.²²

The Holy Spirit of *this* Lord Jesus is here with us now, calling us to come and share in the unfailing love and kindness of his peace, to drink of the water of life, to be nourished by good and healthy food because God's word will accomplish his purposes. God's people will go out with joy and be led in peace. Mountains and hills will burst into song and the whole earth will be filled with the glory of God's grace towards his family (Isaiah 55:1–13).

This is the way we become and be those Paul looked for when writing his letter to the Philippian church. We will then be filled with God's Holy Spirit, united with his Son, Jesus Christ, and living out our 'salvation with fear and trembling' as God works in us and motivates us to strive for God's delight and glory – even in times of suffering (Philippians 2:12–13).

²² Note Paul's use of *therefore* in Philippians 2:9 parallels Isaiah's use in this passage.

At the name of Jesus

Philippians 2:1–13

What is this passage's crescendo, its crowning statement?

The crowning statement in this passage is Paul's declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord over all humanity. Paul indicated this in two ways. Firstly, Paul declared that God has 'highly exalted' Jesus Christ and ranked him above everyone else (Philippians 2:9). Secondly, Paul twice includes all humanity as those who are to acknowledge Christ's supremacy (Philippians 2:9–11).

This submission may be reluctant – it may be that of renegades accepting what they refuse to approve, even though its truth is recognised as accurate. On the other hand, it may be relief – joy that Christ's exaltation accords with their deepest longings and hopes.

Why does his Lordship provoke or evoke this confession?

Paul indicated that this acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship brings glory to the Father. The transferring of glory from Jesus to the Father follows the Father's exaltation of his Son. The initiative and the result relate to the Father.

Jesus did not glorify himself – he glorified God the Father. The Father's exaltation of him is because Jesus, alone among all humanity, did not seek his own exaltation. The glory Jesus received was given to him by the Father – and not from human initiatives. It is this glory that Jesus gives to the Father.

God's glory, therefore, shames and exposes that given to human heroes as inadequate at best, and false vanity at worst. The finality concerning Jesus' authority indicates that only by living under his authority can true glory be fully known. Any authentic glory known by humanity will tacitly or explicitly honour God. Jesus' focus in life was on his Father's glory and not on himself.

What did Jesus do that deserved this honour?

Firstly, Jesus deserved this honour because

he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and was born in human likeness (Philippians 2:6, 7).²³

Paul may have been reminding his readers that Adam was created as the image and likeness of God. Here, the Son of God was 'born in human likeness'.

²³ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage (Philippians 2:6 NIV); who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited (NRSV).

The reference to slavery emphasises Jesus' complete emptying: his whole divinity was involved in this incredible action. The result was a human who had no self-generated ambition. Only the goal and glory of God was relevant to him. His form as a slave was true liberty, while seeming human liberty can result in slavery to idols, the flesh, the world system, and its ruler. Paul was indicating that the incarnation is consistent with the character of God and not contrary to it.²⁴ It seems inconsistent with God's being not to be 'born in human likeness'.²⁵

Secondly, there was no divine humiliation in his incarnation. It was divine action expressing divine purpose and love. He was not in this sense humiliated in this death:

And being found in human form, *he humbled himself* and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8, italics added).

Jesus' crucifixion was not him being a hero or a martyr, but a faithful servant. Paul wrote that Jesus was obedient in dying – as he was in all things. The contrast with Adam was complete! There was no point in becoming human just to be human. There was a task to be done and a work to be completed. Death had to be exposed as arrogant in the extreme. It seemed to be in authority, but the humility of Jesus Christ meant death had no hold on him – and so its hold on those who are his was also broken.

What does the Father's glory mean for us?

The Father's glory is in his exaltation of his Son – not simply because Jesus was his Son, but because of what Jesus accomplished. His humility conquered death – and hence humanity. The Father could not arbitrarily exalt his Son – Jesus' exaltation must be consistent with God's own trinitarian being and with God's created order (cf. Isaiah 45:18–25).

It is easy to conclude that it is Jesus' death that saves us. That is true (as in Philippians 1:2, 21, 3:7–11), but it is not Paul's primary point in *this* passage. He had mentioned at least three things before writing down this hymn. They were to 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves'. Each one of them was not to look 'to your own interests, but to the interests of others', and they were to have the same mind 'that was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:2–5, cf. 2:21).

Paul wanted his readers to know that Jesus was not operating from and in another ephemeral other-worldly or imaginary realm. He was 'born in human likeness',

²⁴ Paul's reference to slavery may suggest Jesus was a greater Moses leading a greater *exodus* as a slave leading other slaves to freedom.

²⁵ The thought is not 'despite being in the form of God', but 'since he was in the form of God'.

and it was in this form that he lived and died (Philippians 2:7). Yet Jesus is more than a perfect example for us to follow. We are to *be* of the *same* mind!

Paul further reinforced his theme after quoting a hymn. He looked for them to obey him in this matter of humility. They were to 'Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you' (Philippians 3:17–21, 4:9). If they did this then they would be fulfilling Paul's exhortation to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure'. God's promises are more than adequate for the task (Philippians 4:13, 19, 20).

The paradox of grace is clear (cf. Philippians 1:12–26). Living humbly conquers the world by depending on the Father. God will fulfil his purposes through his people's faithful, obedient sufferings (cf. Philippians 1:6, 27–30). All else falls short of God's glory – of the glory seen in his own beloved Son.

It is this humility that constitutes the lordship of Jesus Christ, that glorifies the Father and that, according to God's plan and purpose, draws us to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that Jesus Christ is forever Lord, to God the Father's glory.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9–11).

Firstborn from among the dead

Colossians 1:18–20

Christ is the head of his body, the church

There are two parallel statements in these verses: Firstly, headship of the church correlates with being the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. There is no authentic Christian or church life apart from its author, source and ruler, and the fountainhead of all this life is Christ Jesus' resurrection.

Christ's headship of the church also concerns the second statement: Paul had told them that Christ is the firstborn of all creation. As firstborn, he heads creation, meaning creation was made by him, for him and through him, and he holds all things together. What is so for creation is even more so for the church. Just as there is no authentic creational being outside of him, there is nothing in the new creation that is not in him. All creational life that is not recreated in Christ's death and resurrection has no part in the new creation.

In him we are not just *bio-degradable* (dust to dust) but *bio-regradable* (perishable dust to glorified dust)! This glorification only occurs in Christ as firstborn from the dead. The church has no true life apart from the resurrection life of Jesus, the Father's Messiah and Son of his love. *He came and shared our humanity in this creation in order that we may share his humanity in his new creation.*

Messiah's authority as firstborn is that he alone, in all human history, has dealt with the final crisis of human history. He alone passed the final examination – without fault! That test was the death that comes to all humanity because of sin, its guilt and God's holy wrath of love whereby God refuses to endorse anything contrary to his own being and creational and redemptive purposes. Jesus Christ is pre-eminent in everything – in creation, in all human history and in the church. All people are called to account to him and to respond to him not as a harsh judge but as a good, generous, holy and loving saviour.

His 'first place in everything' is not because of his heroic nobility or the result of magnificent martyrdom (Colossians 1:18). These outcomes appeal to us, whereas redemption is unattractive.²⁶ Christ came to deal with our shame, and not with our noble admiration or proper impressions. He came to those needing help, and

²⁶ 'There is in human nature a battery charged with admiration for the heroic. The power of responding to redemption had to be created. ... It acted on dull and dead hearts'. 'The sacrifice of the cross was not [humanity] in Christ pleasing God; it was God in Christ reconciling [humanity], ... It was not [an] heroic [human] dying for a beloved and honoured God; it was God in some form dying for ... malignantly hostile [humanity]'. Forsyth, *Work of Christ, The*, 15, 16, 25. The mystery of God in Christ reconciling humanity is that Jesus Christ always pleased God as a human person, and that humanity in Christ, in some divine mystery, redemptively pleases God in Christ!

to help those who considered that they did not need any assistance (cf. Matthew 9:10–13; Mark 2:15–17; Luke 5:27–32)!²⁷

All God's fullness

Verse 19 is so rich one translation cannot contain it!

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (NRSV/ESV).

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (NIV).

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him (NASB).

Collating these translations suggests four thoughts: pleasure; in him; fullness; residency. *Pleasure* relates to the giver, to 'God our Father' (Colossians 1:2, 3, 12, 2:2, 3:17). *In him* refers to Jesus Christ, whose identity and mission is outlined in this chapter. The *fullness* is the fullness of the *triune* God; it not only is *God's* triune fullness, but it *is* God himself who is in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19). Paul had already mentioned fullness and totality in terms of the people's response to God (Colossians 1:9–11) and had frequently used the word *all* of Christ (Colossians 1:15–17). *Dwelt*, inhabited, or resided in Jesus Christ speaks of Jesus' humanity, of the Old Testament emphases on tabernacle and temple.

All creation – all humanity – was built to see and receive this fullness. The mystery of God is that this fullness was only ever to be known to us – to the redeemed humanity that is the church – in Christ, through his cross and resurrection. All creation has always looked for this revelation, indeed, creation was constructed and functions with this goal ever-present and always in view.

All the triune work of God in Jesus' death and resurrection is needed for creation to be renewed. This renewal of all things must be consistent with what is created and must be done from within the humanity that rebelled against its vocation to live in communion with God and as the image of the Father-Creator, his Son and his Spirit, and their eternal communion.

Reconciliation and peace through the blood of his cross

This divine fullness in Christ was not revealed as a demonstration to provoke us to try harder towards a more noble existence. It was in order that God's pleasure be realised for all humanity. God's purpose was that God's divine fullness *be* in us,

²⁷ He 'had to turn us not from potential friends to actual, but from enemies into friends'. 'The death of Christ had to do with our sin and not our sluggishness. It had to deal with our active hostility, and not simply with the passive dullness of our hearts'. 'Christ arouses antagonism in the human heart and heroism does not'. 'When Christ did what he did, it was not human nature [of itself] doing it, it was God doing it. ... It is God in Christ reconciling. It was not human nature [of itself] offering its very best to God. It was God offering his very best to [humanity]. That is the grand difference between the church and civilisation' *ibid.*, 19, 21, 24.

by us *being* in Christ! This *co-being* is true reconciliation! This mutual indwelling brings peace in all fullness! This transformation of us from being 'estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds' was to present us as 'holy and blameless and irreproachable before him'. This outcome was divinely initiated. It required a massive, complete redemption and involved everything being restructured (Colossians 1:22, cf. 11–14).

It transferred us from the decimated, deceived, deluded, devious and defiant dominions of darkness and from the mean-spirited little kingdoms that had seduced us from within and from without, to the kingdom of the Son of God's love. All history of all humanity, all our personal history comes down to receiving this inheritance through the forgiveness of our sins. There is no reconciliation with God outside of Christ's bloody crucifixion. When Paul wrote that 'God was pleased to reconcile [everything] to himself ... by making peace through the blood of his cross', he meant nothing is reconciled outside of the death of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19).

Paul developed his thoughts further in the next chapter of Colossians where he told them that God had made them alive along with Jesus Christ. Their new life brought forgiveness of their lawlessness and meant that their offences and their consequences were delisted by nailing any record of them to Jesus' cross. God simultaneously

disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:13–15; cf. Philippians 2:10).

The alternative, for Paul, is eternal nothingness. Everything that is something is Christ's – he made it by creation and remade it in his death and resurrection. This renewed creation is peace and peace's harvest, just as Jesus prophesied by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and by weeping over the city's inevitable march to conflict and destruction:

If you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes (Luke 19:42; cf. Zechariah 9:9–12; Malachi 3:1ff).

No-one in that crowd went with him to where he went. They all forsook him when he was handed over and crucified as an infidel and insurrectionary. Yet, though crucified, his heart was for everyone who was 'estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds'.

Hence Paul's affirmation and encouragement that they had been reconciled by Christ Jesus 'in his fleshly body through death' so that they could be presented to God 'holy and blameless and irreproachable before him' as long as they persevered in the faith given and hope promised by God's gospel 'which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven' (Colossians 1:21–23).

Our citizenship is in heaven

2 Timothy 4:6–8

A crown of righteousness

Paul's final witness to his calling begins by identifying his current situation, indicating that he believed that his 'departure' was imminent (2 Timothy 4:6). His reference to being poured out in ritual sacrifice may link with Isaiah 53:12 where God's servant would be rewarded because he identified himself with lawbreakers in his sacrificial death.

Secondly, Paul outlined a three-fold affirmation of his life: He had 'fought the good fight', 'finished the race', and 'kept the faith' (2 Timothy 4:7). He believed he had remained faithful to his calling to the end, even given the significant difficulties that arose along the way.

Having mentioned his present situation and his previous history, the third aspect of his witness concerns his belief that a 'crown of righteousness' awaited him beyond death (2 Timothy 4:8). In typical manner, he lingered briefly on his own story before including everyone who 'longed for his appearing' (2 Timothy 4:8).

His use of the word appearing (*epiphaneia*) rather than *apokalypsis*, meaning disclosure and unveiling, or *parousia*, suggesting presence and arrival, may book-end his reference to being 'poured out as a libation' (2 Timothy 4:6). What, for him, was currently being engulfed by death and funeral rituals, would one day be part of the divine glory that will *appear* at the end of the ages.

Earlier in this letter, Paul stated his confidence that they were saved and called according to God's own 'purpose and grace'. Although they were given this grace in Christ Jesus 'before the ages began', it had now been 'revealed through the *appearing* of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel'.

Paul was unashamed about trusting Jesus to protect the treasures with which God had trusted him until the day of Christ's *appearing* came. Timothy was to align himself with Paul with the Holy Spirit's assistance. Paul emphasised both the 'faith and love that are in Christ Jesus' and the indwelling Holy Spirit as he urged Timothy not to be distracted from 'sound teaching' and 'the good treasure' (2 Timothy 1:9–14, italics added).

This second letter to Timothy reinforced Paul's advice in his earlier epistle, where he urged Timothy to 'fight the good fight' and have 'faith and a good conscience' (1 Timothy 1:18, 19a). Paul had assured Timothy that there was 'great gain in godliness combined with contentment'. Paul had urged him to 'pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness', to fight 'the good fight of the faith' and to 'take hold of the eternal life' (1 Timothy 6:6–14). These beliefs would help Timothy store treasure for the coming age, trust God to provide richly,

to be generous and willing to share with other people, and to 'take hold of the life that really is life' (1 Timothy 6:17–19; cf. Matthew 6:20; James 1:17; Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 4:19; Revelation 14:13).

Joy ahead

Paul's anticipation of receiving a 'crown of righteousness' correlates with the testimony of the author of the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 12:1–3). Whatever difficulties we face and whatever happiness we experience, the joy set before us helps us accomplish the goals God has for us. Jesus has pioneered and perfected a way through the scrub, he has trekked across the desolate and barren deserts of sin, failure and persecution to bring God's family to glory through the cross (Hebrews 2:8b–18).

He was glorified in his first coming in order that he might taste death for everyone, so that at his second coming, God's family will share in, and be, his and his Father's glory. He removed the accusing bonds of terror from Abraham's true descendants and set us free to be God's household (cf. Hebrews 3:1ff). Jesus' mission was his priesthood and his atoning sacrifice, both enabled by him sharing our humanity. We are adopted by his restorative and redemptive giving (cf. Isaiah 53:10–13).

Pressing on

Paul's focus on the joys ahead in being crowned with righteousness correlates with Jesus' teaching prior to his death. The disciples' discomfort and disappointment, Jesus assured them, would turn to joy (John 16:20). Jesus presented himself to them as a bridegroom with a mansion ready for them. He said he was the way to, the truth and the life of his Father, that they would not be orphaned, and that the Spirit, the Father and the Son would live in them (John 14:1–9, 15–23). Jesus used the pain and joy of women giving birth to reinforce his belief that 'you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you' (John 16:17–28, cf. 3:1ff). The disciples could press on precisely because Jesus came from the Father in the Spirit and was returning to the Father (John 16:28–33).

Jesus welcomes us as God's family (cf. Hebrews 2:11, 12 where verse 12 quotes from Psalm 22). Without Jesus' atoning sacrifice there is no adoption and no family. Without God adopting us as his children, Jesus' death is ineffective. If God does not redeem, he is no Father; if he is not Father, he is no redeemer (Isaiah 63:16; cf. Matthew 27:43). But, as Mary learnt at Jesus' tomb, there is a resurrection welcome; Paradise is entered as promised to the crucified criminal (John 20:10–18; Luke 23:34–43). Jesus' last cry becomes our last word (Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59–8:1). All human gain is worthless to the friends of the cross (Philippians 3:7–21). Christ Jesus has taken hold of us in his death and resurrection, Paul assures us, and we now press on to win the prize of this calling: heavenly citizenship and eternal glory.

The grace of God has appeared

Titus 2:1–15

Ornaments to the doctrine of God our Saviour

Paul described what he expected of those who heard the message Titus was sent to give them (Titus 2:1–10). He gave instructions for older people before giving exhortations for younger adults. The context for Paul's message was clear: Titus was to 'teach what is consistent with sound doctrine'. He was to give his message 'so that the word of God may not be discredited' and so 'that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Saviour' (Titus 2:1, 5, 10, cf. 1:9).

Paul was confident that this 'sound doctrine' 'of God our Saviour', given as the 'word of God', would powerfully impact these people. Older men were to increase in temperance, seriousness and prudence. They were to be 'sound in faith, in love and in endurance'. Paul expected this maturity to flow through to everyone in the community (cf. Titus 1:5–9). Reverence, truth, soberness and teaching were to characterise older women, who were also to encourage the younger women 'to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good household managers, kind, being submissive to their husbands' (Titus 2:4, 5).

Paul did not ban women from wider vocational and community life, nor did he suggest men have no domestic responsibilities. His use of 'Likewise' in verse 3 suggests that the qualities assigned to women in home environments are also mutually relevant for their husbands. Husbands of any age are not to discredit God's word by lacking self-control, by not honouring (by not submitting), by loveless impatience or by insensitivity (cf. Titus 2:2, 6–8).

Self-control was to mark young men, with Paul's brief statement emphasising one aspect of his instructions. The apostle's word to Titus was also a paradigm for younger men. Paul's message to slaves completed his brief outline of the way of life he hoped this community of God's people would adopt.

Paul did not simply give ethical instructions to calm a community. The truth and word of God was of central significance and was to be proclaimed in the hope that a harmonious faith-community would flourish as they lived the grace of God among themselves and in their wider world.

The grace of God has appeared

Paul emphasised that the appearing of God's grace trained them. God's salvation was to cause them 'to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly' (Titus 2:11, 12). Paul referred to self-control three times in this passage, providing a substantial contrast to his description of their local culture!

What was in Paul's mind concerning God's grace? What does the appearing of God's grace do that provokes such a radical change in behaviour? The contrast Paul painted is significant (see Titus 1:10–16, 2:12, 3:1–3, 9–11). Paul's statement that 'the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all' contains two parallel thoughts (Titus 2:11). The appearing of God's grace brings salvation; and bringing salvation means grace comes into view. God's grace did not appear as a commodity, but as a person, as Jesus Christ.

Paul expanded on this theme when he added that Jesus Christ 'gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (Titus 2:14). Those who have been redeemed from iniquity will be motivated to live as Paul described. They will search the Scriptures to discern what is said about holy living to avoid falling back into the ways of death from which they needed saving. To benefit from God's self-giving in the death of Christ is a sobering and sacred activity. It is certainly in great contrast to Paul's description of their former lives.

Purified for Christ

Paul's exhortation involved more than avoiding iniquity. He had in mind being purified not only *by* Christ's death and resurrection ('he ... gave himself *for* us') but being purified *by* Christ *for* Christ. Paul's focus moved from themselves and their iniquity to the one who appeared as God's grace to 'purify *for herself* a people of his own' (Titus 2:14, italics added).

This purified people are 'zealous for good deeds' as they 'wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation [*or* appearing] of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13). Mindful of the deliverance that Christ has accomplished in his death and resurrection, they now anticipate a further appearing. What was established in his first appearing will be seen in its realised glory in the blessings that accompany God's final self-manifestation in Christ.

Paul's description of the way they were to live was so that they would become substantial people – ornaments to the love and truth of God, radiating the glory that God has ahead of them (cf. Titus 2:10).

They were 'people of his own', indicating their unique relationship with God (Titus 1:1–3, 14). They were God's elect family, living in faith and in the knowledge of godly truth. They knew the 'hope of eternal life', promised to them from 'before the ages began'. 'God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour' had revealed themselves through the proclamation of the word of God at his command. This threefold statement of God's grace and mercy – before creation, now, and into eternity – was motivation for godly living. True godliness for God's people – for God's community – was corporate as well as personal. No wonder Paul encouraged them to live together in hope and learn from those more experienced in life while waiting for the greatness and glory of God the Father and Jesus Christ, our Saviour, to appear.

God's saving goodness and loving kindness

Titus 3:1–15

Remind them and insist on these things

Paul urged Titus to 'declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority' (Titus 2:15). Titus was to 'remind them' and to 'insist on these things' since 'the saying is sure' and 'these things are excellent and profitable to everyone'. It is not possible to separate Paul's gospel from his ethics. The things that are 'excellent and profitable to everyone' relate both to belief in God and to being devoted 'to good works' (Titus 3:1, 8).

Paul's message was not optional or open for debate. He was God's servant and Jesus Christ's apostle because of

the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began – in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour (Titus 1:1–3).

The truth which Paul proclaimed leads to godliness and flows from godliness. It is the truth *of* God, *from* God, and is given to bring us *into* God's promised gift of eternal life. God made this promise before creation, and it is unaltered by the turmoils and turbulence of history. God's word is not negated by the evil intentions and actions of rebellious humanity or those of spiritual powers.

God revealed his word at the appropriate time (Titus 1:3). God was not prevented from declaring his word through those he commanded to proclaim it. God's command is effective not only in ensuring proclamation, but in fulfilling his word. Those who hear his word live in hope.

To reduce God's word to legalism or moralism is to persist in the foolishness that accompanies disobedience. It is to be led astray, and results in bondage to worldly pleasures and passions. No wonder Paul was resolute about his advice to Titus. There is an eternity of difference between living in the goodness of God and perishing in the rottenness of hate, envy, malice and greed.

The goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour

The references in this letter to what is good, and to goodness, relate to the actions of the people of God (Titus 1:8, 16, 2:3, 5, 7, 14, 3:1, 8, 14, cf. 1:2, 2:12). Goodness flows to and through God's people because of the saving actions of God. Any questions concerning human worth or otherwise must be seen in the context of God's mercy (Titus 3:4–7; cf. Genesis 1; Psalm 100).

It is the appearing of God's goodness and loving kindness towards us in the person and work of Jesus Christ that rescues us from evil. God's salvation is doom to what

is rotten, not only by saving us from it, but by exposing its decadence and self-righteousness (Titus 3:3, 4). Paul's statement in these verses develops his earlier declaration that 'the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation' (Titus 2:11, cf. 2:13). God's grace, goodness, loving kindness and mercy are active in the appearing of Jesus Christ as our salvation.

This salvation is described as saving us 'through the water [*or* washing] of rebirth [*or* regeneration] and renewal by the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5). It takes a mighty work for God to declare anyone justified by his grace, and to make his people 'heirs according to the hope of eternal life' (Titus 3:7; cf. Luke 15:22–24).

God's salvation is twofold. God saved us by rebirthing and regenerating us by washing away the rottenness of our evil. God saved us by renewing us by God's Holy Spirit. This reference to the Holy Spirit is significant. Having spoken of the impact of the salvation and grace of our great God and Father in his Son Jesus Christ 'who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds', Paul now also emphasised their 'renewal by the Holy Spirit'. He was reminding them that the Holy Spirit had been 'poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour' in order that they be God's people and inherit his promises (Titus 2:14, 3:6). God's justified people – released from their own self-righteousness – receive a great inheritance from God now and in eternity!

Let no one look down on you or despise you

Paul's frequent calls to goodness and godliness were not without foundation. The triune action of God is at work in God's people. As God's people live in the richness of *God's* grace, goodness, loving kindness and mercy, *their* goodness and godliness will be increasingly evident.

This evidence of God's grace is because God's people have been 'justified by his grace' (Titus 3:7). The 'faith we share' as those who 'believe in God' (Titus 1:4, 3:8, cf. 1:2) is faith in God's saving promises and actions. God makes us righteous (*or* justified) not by our actions but by God's saving actions. Paul's exhortation to Titus not to let anyone look down on him was Paul urging Titus to live, preach, teach and declare *these things* to those to whom he was sent (Titus 2:15).

Titus could 'exhort and reprove with all authority' confident of God's promises which had been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and which were richly poured out by the Father through his Son (Titus 2:15). His authority came from God and not from himself! Titus knew that the grace which is to come in great glory is the same grace which had come in Jesus Christ. It is *this* grace which justified Titus and equipped him to live in the promises of God (Titus 2:11, 13, 3:4; cf. Exodus 33:19–34:9).

Grace be with you all

Paul's emphasis on Titus telling them what they should be about is best understood in the context of Paul's message regarding grace. As older people responded to the grace of God, God's grace flowed through them to those who were younger. Grace then flowed back in the honour and submission that came from those under their leadership. This flow of grace would have been evident when God's family came together. It would have also been seen in their homes, in their workplaces and in the wider community.

This outpouring of grace was God's work and was not to be received lightly. They were to be disciplined and trained by it, avoiding unnecessary controversies and shunning ungodliness. Its results would be very fruitful:

And let people learn to devote themselves to good works in order to meet urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive (Titus 3:14).

Paul saw a productive and fruitful community in action, full of faith, hope and love lived out in the grace, mercy, goodness and loving kindness of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Titus 3:8, 14, 15, cf. 1:4, 2:14).

Paul's question to these people through Titus was why waste time in the empty passions and foolish pleasures of degeneration and death when God regenerates and renews us to live for all eternity in the abundance of his grace?

Part Four:

Incarnation and Apocalypse

John's Gospel

We have seen his glory

John 1:1–18

In the beginning

As with the book of Genesis, John's Gospel commences with a declaration about the beginning. Genesis chapters 1 and 2 describe God's relationship with creation and humanity. Humanity is God's image and likeness and is blessed with the gift of fruitfulness. Humanity is to till and guard Eden, and to extend this fullness to the ends of earth. The word for tilling the soil is also used for priestly ministry, while priests were to ensure the sanctuary was protected. The human family was given a royal-priestly vocation in their designated home which they were to explore and express through marriage and family, and in sabbath life and spiritual worship.

The first couple in Eden were to multiply and fill the earth, with the earth as God's palace-sanctuary under humanity's active care and nurture. Their worship and service of God would honour each other and respect creation. It would be a covenant-type love response to a generous and holy personal God, and not a severe, contractual legalism to a divine despot.

There are references to word and spirit in both creation accounts. The poetic outline indicates

the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light (Genesis 1:2, 3 NIV).

In the following narrative,

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7; cf. Isaiah 54:16; Ezekiel 37:9; Haggai 1:9).²⁸

God was present to and spoke with Adam and Eve – and the serpent (Genesis 2:16, 3:8ff, cf. 1:1:28) as well as with himself (Genesis 2:18).

John wanted his readers to know that the person and work of Jesus tells us about who this God is and the way this God relates and works. Working backwards from humanity to God is always deficient. Extrapolation of this type easily leads to darkness and idolatry (cf. John 1:10, 11). We do better by starting with God's own self-disclosure. While this is partially given in the Old Testament, it is personally revealed in and by Jesus Christ:

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 1:18)

²⁸ "Blew" ... suggests a good puff such as would revive a fire'. Gordon Wenham, *World Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas, USA: Word Books, 1987), 60.

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him* (John 1:18 NASB).

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him (John 1:18 NKJV).

... was the Word

The beginning is mentioned twice and the Word three times in the first two verses of John's Gospel. The sense of the initial expression is of the Word already present before the beginning: 'In the beginning the Word already was' There seems an inherent contradiction in this thought unless there is some sense of inner plurality and inter-personal dialogue within God's unity and singularity. As the Word of this divine essence of being, this Word must be in some relation to a Speaker; the Word must be the Word of Someone. If an eternal Word is alone, then this Word must be impersonal, incomprehensible and unknowable.

John's Gospel informs us that 'the Word was with God'. The Word was towards God, face to face with God, and in full participation and communion with God. Each divine person is in unity as one God, fully engaged with the other, with no self-disclosure withheld because of failure or insecurity. The depths of each person are eternally shared in a hospitality where each makes 'room' and 'time' for the other, and which we can only feebly try to describe using creational metaphors from our space-time environment and existence!

This understanding of these first verses places primacy in the person of one-God, in God's relationships within God's-self, and in God's relationship with humanity. God is not seen as subject to reason – as may appear from the use of the term Word – nor is God subject to emotions or mysticism – as if Word expresses something other than God.

John's description of God emphasises the completeness and mutuality of God within God, appropriately leaving us with a mystery. John, for example, while taking us into an awareness of the communion and union of persons within God's person, does not say that God was or is the Word.

John's picture of completeness is incomplete without John's context of the beginning. God's fullness includes God's actions as creator in creating the universe, as life in relating to created living beings, and as light in overcoming darkness.²⁹ God's overcoming indicates that darkness does not comprehend or conquer God's person, purposes or actions. The ongoing shining of God's light is the triumph of

²⁹ This reference to darkness may include the formlessness and emptiness mentioned in Genesis 1. Its context in this Gospel includes the darkness of evil and the powers that seek to overtake God. Note the contrast between the first chapters of Genesis and John's Gospel in that the work of the word and spirit described in Genesis chapter 1 was uncontested.

life over death, and the affirmation that God is faithful in creating, sustaining and accomplishing God's own purposes (John 1:3–5).

And the Word become flesh

When John wrote that 'the Word became flesh', his message is that what – or better who – God is towards us reveals who God is in himself: The Word became flesh; the Word lived among us, and even though the Word is not now among us in flesh, the Word is still flesh. The word flesh indicates true and full humanity; not sinful humanity or humanity's inclination to commit evil.

The 'Who' who has been revealed as Word-God with God, is Son-God with Father-God. This description is not an extension of or extrapolation from a human family, but the reverse. John's language about Jesus is the context for understanding something of the internal and external relationships of God, including those with humanity as his image and likeness.³⁰

God's towards-ness with us reveals something of the towards-ness of the Word with or towards God. Basic to this divine orientation is giving and receiving in the context of trust and transparency. God's fullness reaches humanity in the face of human conflict and rebellion as light shining in darkness. God's loving faithfulness and faithful love comes to humanity as grace and truth revealed in and by Jesus Christ. This revelation is the essence of God's glory, of the glory seen by the disciples – and, by faith, by us (John 1:14–18; cf. John 12:37–43, 17:1ff; Exodus 34:6, 7).

Although no-one sees God in God's eternity, God is known, explained and revealed in and by Jesus' humanity. The Son who is 'close to the Father's heart' came to his own home, his own creation and his own family, but was rejected (John 1:18). Among those who rejected him were (and are) those who received (and receive) power to become God's family through faith: 'born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:10–13).

John's prologue establishes Jesus Christ as God's new humanity, who, as God among us, is the priest-king in the sanctuary-palace of God's creation. Jesus establishes and completes what Adam and Eve, and all humanity with them were given to do, but failed to achieve.

³⁰ Image and likeness are both terms with familial connotations, as, for example, in Genesis 5:3.

In him was life – 1

John 1:1–18

Who the people are

John describes several main groups of people in these first chapters. There are those looking for national renewal and God's deliverance through God's Messiah. These include John the Baptist, his disciples, and the people who went to him for baptism (John 1:19–34). Several of Jesus' disciples and followers – Andrew, his brother Peter, Philip, and Nathanael – are mentioned in this context (John 1:35–51). Then, after Jesus met Nicodemus, John's and Jesus' disciples were in the Judean countryside (John 3:22–36).

The religious establishment – including Levites and Pharisees – is present in both accounts of John the Baptist and his disciples (John 1:19–34, 3:22–36). The money changers and animal traders were busy in the temple (with the approval of the religious leadership), along with those there for worship (John 2:13–25). Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, met Jesus by night (John 3:1–21).

A family wedding crisis at Cana surfaces Mary's anticipation of her son's ministry (John 2:1–12). The woman at the well was relieved of her spiritual thirst and received living water, and the Samaritans heard that Jesus was the Saviour of the world (John 4:1–44).

Who God is

The relationship of the Word and God described in this introduction is one of great intimacy and communion. God's life was in God's Word, and that life 'was the light of all people' – people created by God through the Word of God. God-God, God-people and God-world relationships are evident in these early verses.

In contrast to the intimacy and communion of the Word – as God, with God – people are said to be in a darkness which tries to overcome and overwhelm the light, but which cannot comprehend it. John, in writing his Gospel, emphasised this by pointing out that 'the world did not know him' and that 'his own people did not accept him' (John 1:10, 11, cf. 1:26 where John the Baptist declared that there was one among them whom they did not know). People-people and people-God relationships are considered in these verses.

The shining of the light in the darkness is described as the Word becoming 'flesh and living among us' and revealing his glory. This glory reveals the Word as the Son of the Father and is seen in Jesus' revelation of his Father to the world. The Word becoming a person within humanity reflects something of the Word being a person within the Godhead.

There are many parallels to and contrasts with the Genesis creation story in these verses. Jesus is portrayed as coming as the first of a new humanity, as a second

Adam. He is shown coming to a creation not described as good (though it remains essentially good or else Jesus' signs would be insubstantial and his words ineffective), but to a world in the darkness of ignorance and sin – and in need of his life, light, grace and truth.

Jesus came to restore humanity's relationship with God as the one through whom the first humanity was created. He did this by revealing his relationship with his Father as the Son of God – as the Word of God, as God. Jesus became human forever so that, through his life, death and resurrection, we might receive new birth into an eternal life in the Holy Spirit with him and his Father.

What God does

Jesus took up the moral, physical and spiritual battle against evil. The first Adam was created to live in holy, loving communion with God and so fill the earth under God's blessing. Jesus came to a world disrupted and in turmoil, to a humanity in darkness and facing death, to a humanity uneasy, unfulfilled and unsettled. The chaos and emptiness that results from human sin and rebellion involves a hostility absent from the creation in the first chapter of Genesis.

Where the first couple failed, the second Adam – the one from heaven who 'was' before the beginning and who lived in this world – succeeded (John 1:5, 12, 29–34, 51, 2:19–22, 3:11–16, 27–30, 31–36). He defeated evil, destroyed the works of the devil and delivered those afraid of death – so establishing a family that will, in him, bring God's fullness to the ends of the earth.

His victory brings to birth a new – a renewed – family of God, 'born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God', and who are led by the Spirit wherever the Spirit goes (John 1:13, 3:5–8).

The Son's intimacy with his Father and the Father's love for his Son reach their goal in creation as humanity reaches its destiny.

In him was life – 2

John 3:22–36

In the beginning God

John began his Gospel with the relationship of the Word to God: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God’ (John 1:1, 2). Everything God does issues from God’s communion with God’s Word. This complete communion is the inter-personal communication of the divine persons who are the one God.

The reference to ‘In the beginning ... God’ has clear reminders of Genesis chapter one where God is the speaker whose word brings creation to form and fullness. God is called the LORD God in Genesis 2, using the name of Israel’s covenant God. LORD carries the meaning of the *One who is*, as in ‘I am who I am’ (Exodus 3:14; cf. Revelation 1:4, 8).

God is depicted speaking with humanity throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. The first couple encountered God before and after they sinned. Cain was addressed by God concerning his rejected sacrifice. Each significant divine action was accompanied by God speaking of his purposes and making promises. God spoke with Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets – along with Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Miriam, Deborah and many named and unnamed significant women.

The Word became flesh

This means that when ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’, God was making God’s most significant statement to humanity about God’s-self and God’s intentions. The Word who is with God, and who is God, is God’s Son. It is this Son of God, Jesus Christ, who lived as a man – and lives as a man forever – in the fullness of his relationship with the Father (John 1:14–18). He came from the Father as the way to the Father, as the truth and life of the Father (John 14:6).

John the Baptist declared himself to be the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah of a voice calling out in the wilderness that God’s people should prepare for their LORD’s coming (John 1:23; cf. Isaiah 40:3). That is why John declared that the person following him had higher authority because he preceded him (John 1:30). John gave strong and clear testimony to who Jesus was, and to what Jesus came to do (John 1:19–36, 3:22–30). John came as ‘a witness to testify to the light’ of God in Jesus (John 1:5–9), but the

one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony (John 3:31, 32).

Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, God's Anointed. He was Word made flesh, God's Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was fully human in the fullness of the Spirit: The Father loved his Son and gave testimony and truth to him. The Father placed everything under his Son's authority and the Father's Son spoke God's words having received God's Holy Spirit 'without measure' (John 3:31–35). This was the reason John the Baptist explained Jesus' sovereignty as God's Son in terms of Jesus baptising in the Holy Spirit (John 1:29–35).

Jesus came as king of Israel, and as their true prophet and priest. He identified himself in his conversation with Nathanael as being the regal Son of Man in whom the full stature of original humanity would be realised (John 1:37–51, cf. 3:13; Daniel 7:14, 27).

John the Baptist described himself as the

friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, [and who] rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:29, 30).

Jesus was the bridegroom come to bring his bride to the heavenly marriage supper (cf. John 14:1ff; Revelation 19:5ff, 21:1ff, 22:12ff). No wonder his mother longed for the revelation of his glory at the marriage at Cana (John 2:1–11; cf. Genesis 2:18–25).

The Lamb of God

It is as baptiser with the Spirit that Jesus speaks to both Nicodemus and to the woman at the well. Living in the reign of God is being led by the Spirit of God who blows wherever God chooses. True worship is not according to the temple practices that Jesus opposed, but

true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21–24, 2:13–22, 3:5–9).

As baptiser with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the one who, in and through the Spirit, brings God's family into true, living worship. God's family is evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of Man who establishes the reign of God – which can only be entered by being born of the Spirit.

Central to this outcome is John's description of Jesus as 'the Lamb of God' (John 1:29, 36). In the darkness, ignorance, inadequacy, immorality, fear of death and false worship of fallen humanity, Jesus is the true human who brings the life of God to the world. He did and does this as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'; as the serpent lifted up in the wilderness to save those who believe 'in the name of the only Son of God' (John 3:10–18). The alternative is unbelief and disobedience which is described as experiencing divine wrath (John 3:36).

The 'sin of the world' to which John the Baptist referred is unbelief (John 1:29, cf. 1:10–13, 50, 3:11, 16ff, 33)!

The Saviour of the world

Jesus is seen meeting religious leaders in these early chapters of John's Gospel. Jesus also sought out John the Baptist's ministry and those who were looking for the renewal and restoration of Israel as the kingdom of God. He attended a marriage feast, visited the temple where he protested about money traders and sellers, met with Nicodemus, and ministered to the woman at the well.

There is a sequence in John's description: God's own trinitarian being and God's self-revelation to humanity is primary. The impact on community life of our response to God is described in that context. Living water is poured out. Dry, thirsty and barren lives are reborn by the Spirit of God. The sin of unbelief and the disobedience that results from sin is removed. True worship is restored. Needy families are refreshed with the true wine of the coming kingdom. Creation is blessed with a renewal that will bring it to its final fullness in God the Father, in and through his Christ by the power and presence of his Spirit (cf. Revelation 22:12–19).

Cleansing the temple – 3³¹ John 2:13–22, Malachi 2:10–3:18

My Father's house

It is most likely that the accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple are of different occasions.³² If this is an accurate analysis, then it is significant that Jesus began and ended his public ministry by going up to Jerusalem 'when the Passover of the Jews was near' and cleansing the temple (John 2:13–22; Matthew 21:12–17). He told them at the end of his public ministry that they had changed his Father's house from being a house of prayer for all nations into a den of thieves. One implication in his message was that he had come to turn that den of thieves back into his Father's house.

Jesus' declaration at the start of his ministry is a play on the word house: 'He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"' (John 2:16; KJV 'make not my Father's house an house of merchandise'). His concern for his Father's house was evident when his parents took him to Jerusalem as a boy, and he said he was about his Father's business. Now, anointed by the Holy Spirit, and in obedience to his heavenly Father, he returned to the temple for the Passover – to the festival celebrating God's redemption of his people from Egypt.

Jesus' cleansing of the temple would have been understood as an act of someone with messianic aspirations engaged on a new redemptive *exodus* – and not merely of a political or social reformer. Jesus was identifying himself with the messenger in Malachi's prophecy (Malachi 3:1–4). The arrival of the longed for and much anticipated messianic 'messenger of the covenant' would involve a necessary and effective purification which would enable the people to 'present [pleasing] offerings to the LORD in righteousness'.

There is a considerable contrast between God's faithfulness in not consuming them and their treacherous behaviour. Although God was their Creator-Father, their relationships involved faithlessness and violence and produced ungodly offspring. Their worship was defiled with the LORD no longer accepting their

³¹ See Don Priest, *Meditations on Resilience and Renewal*, vol. 1, (2022) for the first two meditations in this series.

³² There is nothing in common in the first five chapters of John's Gospel and the synoptic Gospels (apart from John the Baptist – and that has little common material). The scribes were sent to Galilee to oppose Jesus (Mark 3:22), perhaps because of this incident. The narratives are very different: for example, Mark records them wanting to destroy him, while in John's account he is asked for a sign. The evidence is confused when accusations are made to Caiaphas at Jesus' trial about Jesus destroying and rebuilding the temple (Mark 14:56–9). This confusion is less likely if Jesus had said these words a few days earlier. Lastly, Jesus' objection is not to their dishonesty, as in the first three Gospels, but to their practice.

offerings, even when they were offered with tears (Malachi 2:10–17). Along with that, they were not bringing their tithes into God's house and so were robbing God. Consequently, God would judge evil and immoral people including those who gave false witness, oppressed hired workers, mistreated widows and orphans, and did not care appropriately for strangers (Malachi 3:5–18).

Judgement would come, not primarily to destroy, but to purify and renew and call them to return to God and find his blessings to be abundant (cf. Isaiah 56:6–8, Isaiah 59:15b–21; Jeremiah 7:9–11). They would then fulfil their calling as God's royal and priestly nation, as his 'treasured possession', by reflecting and worshipping him as their giver-forgiver (cf. Exodus 19:5, 6). The result of repentance would be stunning: the difference between the wicked and the righteous would be readily discerned and the curse of family discord and disintegration would be removed (Malachi 3:10–18, 4:1–6).

Rebuilding the temple

If the religious leaders of Jesus' day had understood Jesus' words about the temple, then they would not have asked for a sign. Jesus had taught that the days of the temple were nearly over. He had come as the true temple, as he, for example, discussed with the woman at Samaria (John 2:18–22, 4:19–24).

There was irony in the religious leaders' focus on the Jesus' comments about the temple's destruction. Their temple was not finally finished for about another thirty years and was destroyed only a few years later. They caused Jesus' death while their successors helped bring about the temple's destruction. Their actions in killing Jesus unintentionally ended the need for further temple sacrifices – an outcome that occurred when the temple was destroyed.

Jesus' action in cleansing the temple may seem out of character. But he was completely 'in character'. The zeal that consumed him was his Father's zeal for the temple to be pure. This was his messianic ministry. The sign Jesus gave them was clear: he spoke of his body as the true temple which would be destroyed and rebuilt three days later. His disruption was a prophetic drama of what was about to happen to him as well as what would eventually be realised when Jerusalem fell.

Jesus' words about the temple were not lost on the crowds, who used them against him. When, a little while after the cleansing of the temple described in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was arrested and taken to Caiaphas, the false evidence presented was that 'This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days"' (Matthew 26:59–68). The crowd at Jesus' cross mocked him by reminding him of what he had said when cleansing the temple (Matthew 27:37–44). Jesus, concerned about temple-robbers, was crucified by 'thieves', between thieves, as a thief!

Jesus is the true worshipper

There is only one true worshipper in all history, and that is Jesus. His life and death were true worship. He is now, as a man, worshipping (Matthew 11:25ff; John 4:19–24, 17:1ff; Hebrews 2:11–13, 8:1, 2).

Jeremiah lamented the false prophets who treated the wounds God's people experienced because of their false worship as though they were trivial scratches (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11). Jesus cleansed the temple, consumed with the true worship which ultimately forever silences all forms of false worship. He continued to worship even during the dereliction and abandonment he experienced on the cross. His worship is the worship which erupts into human history at Pentecost, and now flows from our hearts and will fill eternity. Jesus' cleansing of the temple was not an act of or a prelude to any divine vengeance and venom. His temple cleansing was a prophecy of what was ahead for the nation because of their vengeful venom against his non-violent ministry. His ministry proclaimed God's peace while encountering the aggression and oppression that was aimed at him by the nation's religious and political leaders.

We have no worship but Jesus' worship, and the worship we give is by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Galatians 2:20). The promised eternal city has no temple 'for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb'. Nothing impure is in that temple – nothing of the false worship which Jeremiah and Malachi described, or which is seen in the Gospels. The bride of Christ is revealed in purity as the city of God, the family of the Father and the community of the Holy Spirit (Revelation 21, 22).

Cleansing the temple – 4

John 2:13–22, Psalm 69

Zeal for your house will consume me

The zeal that consumed Jesus was his longing for God's salvation to free humanity from the defilement of human degradation and depravity, and its hatred for God and God's purity and love. Jesus' zeal – 'zeal for your house will consume me' – reminded his disciples of this psalm which described a servant's sufferings and death and God's vindication of him (Psalm 69:9).

The words about true worship at the end of this psalm are a reminder of Jeremiah's message concerning the dangers of false worship:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' – only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD (Jeremiah 7:9–11).

When the religious leaders asked Jesus for a sign, he gave them one: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). He predicted that he would rise as the true temple three days after they had torn him down. He came to them as the true worshipper so that, they, as God's people, could worship God in spirit and truth, free from the false, idolatrous and sensual worship that seeks self-justification (John 4:23).

While the description of Jesus cleansing the temple at the end of his ministry contrasts his teaching with that of the religious leaders, the battle lines are not as well developed in John's account. John emphasised who Jesus was and the purpose of his coming. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus' healings and teaching develop this perspective and tell a similar story to the other Gospels.

Jesus knew his ministry's goal from its beginning. His death and resurrection did not come to him as an unplanned, unwanted interruption, but as the deliberate plan of God. The zeal that consumed him was his longing that God's salvation would free God's people from the defilement of human degradation and depravity, and of their hatred of God and God's purity and love.

I have come into deep waters

The psalmist's prayer not only predicted Jesus' cross; the psalmist prayed as he did because of the Holy Spirit's witness to him of Jesus' sufferings, death and resurrection.

Psalm 69 starts with the psalmist, presumably David, calling to God to save him from the untrue accusations of his opponents, rather than because of his own

failures (Psalm 69:1–5). This is even more true of Jesus, who, Paul declared, became ‘sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Peter’s testimony of Jesus was similar: ‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit’ (1 Peter 3:18).

David’s longings were not self-centred (Psalm 69:6–8). His hope was for God to be glorified through his suffering by God saving him. David believed he suffered because of his testimony to God in the face of the disintegration of his family relationships. This, too, is a little like Jesus’ prayer where, knowing that his death was immanent, he asked his Father to glorify him with the glory he had known in his Father’s presence before creation so that he could glorify his Father (John 17:1–3).

The zeal identified was David’s persistent longing to stay forever in the LORD’s house rather than be where wickedness habituated (Psalm 69:9–12, cf. Psalms 23:6 and 84:10). This was the reason David’s enemies mocked him. It was even more true with Jesus who thirsted for the living God throughout his ministry, sufferings and death, and who as God’s Lamb removed the world’s sin (Psalm 69:3, 21; John 1:29, 36, 19:28–30).

David prayed for the end of his suffering, for God’s redemption and liberation – for God’s goodness, steadfast love and abundant mercy – to rescue him (Psalm 69:13–20). God knew David’s suffering more than David ever knew – just as God knew that Jesus suffered knowing frailty, scorn, rejection, shame and disregard (cf. Isaiah 53:3).

By saving David, God was also judging David’s enemies (Psalm 69:22–29). Similarly, Jesus’ death dooms those who reject his prayer that God forgive those who did not know what they were doing, just as it is salvation for those who seek him. The apostles linked David’s indignation to Judas’ death (Luke 23:34; Acts 1:20; Psalm 69:25).

Paul used this psalm to affirm that through Israel’s

stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean (Romans 11:9–12)!

Paul went on to contrast disobedience and obedience, highlighting God’s immense riches, wisdom and knowledge. Paul’s doxology set the context for his plea that they offered themselves as living sacrifices in acts of spiritual worship that would be ‘holy and acceptable to God’ (Romans 11:30–12:2).

Paul's reasoning affirms that the church – the body of Christ – is indeed a 'house of prayer for all nations' (Mark 11:17; cf. Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13).

The true worshipper is the new temple

David's prayer can be read as anticipating the end of animal sacrifices (Psalm 69:30–36). The New Testament indicates that God has provided all that these sacrifices looked for and more through the gift of God's beloved Son (cf. John 3:16, Hebrews 10:5–10). God's victory in Christ Jesus opens eternity for God's people and renews the heavens and the earth. Jesus lived and died as the true worshipper and the new temple – and was raised on the third day (John 2:19). He is the 'house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 56:7). He has turned the 'den of robbers' into his Father's dwelling place (Jeremiah 7:11). His praise and worship fill the temple; all false worship is over, forever. He has purified his people and has given them thankful and joyful hearts.

The 'windows of heaven' are opened and God has poured down 'an overflowing blessing on his people' (Malachi 3:10). The harvest of the Spirit is beyond description. Offerings are presented to the LORD in righteousness. God's people are purified and refined, and delight in loving their Creator-Father. Orphans, widows and strangers are at home in the family of God – full of God's joy and peace, and the knowledge that they will never be abandoned. They delight in obeying God's voice and in doing God's will.

The marriage of the bride and the Lamb has come. The prodigal children have come home. The Spirit and the bride welcome everyone who hears and those who are thirsty come and drink of the water of life. This refreshment is the water of the river in the new Jerusalem which flows from the throne of grace – from the altar of God – and which waters the tree of life. No longer does an angel guard the tree of life with a sword: the gates of the eternal city are open for ever. The nations bring their glory in – the true glory of the cross that has healed them. They worship the one they see face to face, the one who is their light, the one who is the true temple in whom they live and worship forever.

Jesus' disruption was not a prediction of God acting forcefully against wickedness, but of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. He was not providing an example of God finally losing patience and being justifiably angry, but of the consequences of turning the place of prayer into a commercial religious racket. The violence against Jesus, resulting in his death, illustrated this drama and contrasts the peaceful actions of God in Christ in the face of human evil and malice – peaceful action that heralds and ensures a renewed and reconciled humanity in a regenerated and flourishing creation.

Seeing the kingdom of God

John 3:1–21

A Pharisee named Nicodemus

While the statement ‘Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews’ introduces the context for Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, it also points to the significance of this meeting in understanding John’s Gospel (John 3:1). The dialogue with the Pharisees and their increasing hostility to Jesus ultimately led to Jesus’ crucifixion. John mentions Nicodemus twice more, both times in critical events.

Jesus declared on the great, last day of a festival of Tabernacles that ‘rivers of living water’ would flow from those who believed in him (John 7:37–8:1). John understood this to refer to the Holy Spirit being given after Jesus’ death. The crowd saw Jesus’ proclamation in terms of him being Messiah. The temple police testified to his authority. The Pharisees and chief priests wanted him arrested, but Nicodemus asked them whether Jewish law passed judgement without examining evidence:

They replied, ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.’ Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives (John 7:50–53).

While Nicodemus had been influential in reducing the impact of the Pharisees’ earlier antagonism, he was side-lined when they decided to crucify Jesus (John 19:38–42).

They found Jesus

Prior to Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus, the Pharisees – of whom Nicodemus was one – had sent ‘priests and Levites from Jerusalem’ to ask John the Baptist whether he was the Messiah, Elijah or ‘the prophet’ (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 3:22). John responded that they were to ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ (John 1:19–23).

John saw Jesus as so regal that John – Jesus’ herald – did not see himself as ‘worthy to untie the thong of his sandal’. The coming king – whom John declared ranked ‘ahead of him because he was before him, even though he would come after him’ – would perform two majestic ministries. He would be ‘the Lamb of God’ who would remove the world’s sin – and not just of Israel’s. He was also the one on whom the Spirit came from heaven like a dove and remained on, who would baptise with the Holy Spirit (John 1:24–34).

John understood that his water baptism was validated by revealing Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man and prince of peace who would rule the nations and who would deal with the substantial and ultimate issues facing fallen, rebellious humanity.

The religious-political order of the day seemed secure and sound in easing tensions but was inept in dealing with the real dilemma facing Israel and other nations. The religious leaders' alliance with Rome was symbolic of all failed human dynasties that exercise human power but are devoid of the power of the Holy Spirit and the authority of Jesus as Messiah-Christ.

Prior to describing Nicodemus' visit to Jesus, John's Gospel also details the initial calling by Jesus of his disciples, their declaration that they had found the Messiah and Nathanael's conversation with Jesus (John 1:49–51). The account of the wedding at Cana concludes by referring to Jesus' signs: 'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him' (John 2:1–11).

Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover after providing this sign. He drove out money changers from the temple, telling those selling doves to 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' The clash of the kingdoms was very apparent as the dove-anointed Messiah rebuked the dove-sellers (John 2:12–17). The discussion that followed focused on whether their temple or his temple-body would survive (John 2:18–25).

Being born of the Spirit into the kingdom of God

When Nicodemus declared Jesus to be 'a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God', he was presuming to have grasped the essence of who Jesus was and the nature and purpose of his ministry. He believed his assessment was authentic and authoritative and was the basis on which he met Jesus and acknowledged and honoured him (John 3:1–2).

Jesus agreed with Nicodemus that Jesus' signs were evidence of the presence and action of the Spirit of God, but Jesus did not accept that Nicodemus understood the related signs. To see or enter the kingdom of God required Nicodemus being spiritually *and* physically born:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:3–8).

The central issue on Jesus' mind was that Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel had not entered or accurately seen the reign of God and did not understand heavenly things (John 3:5–10). According to Jesus, Nicodemus should have known the will of the Spirit evident in Jesus' ministry, recognised the reign of God in and by Jesus and received Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed Son of God and Son of Man who forgives sins.

Jesus indicated that he was not about a re-run of what was already in place, nor was he about developing Israel into a greater and better state. His kingdom meant

the demise of all that seemed so substantial to Nicodemus. Jesus would be crucified, dead and buried. But his body, his temple would be raised from the dead. By contrast, the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed. Nicodemus may have seen the signs, but he had under-estimated their significance.

A new era was dawning: the era of the Spirit, where sins are forgiven and where Christ, the Messiah, reigns over the kingdoms of this world, and where Jesus reveals the Father to his people, who worship him in Spirit and in truth (John 3:31–36; cf. 4:1ff). Jesus was offering freedom from condemnation. Jesus would be ‘lifted up’ as a serpent in the desert in defeating evil’s deadly tyranny and in giving eternal life (John 3:11–21).

God loved the world

John 3:14–21, 34–36

God loves – we live

John 3:16 can be an anchor for us and can provide hope in our troubled world. Its message is one of life for all humanity. This verse has two sections. One part speaks of God, of God's love, and of those whom God loves. The other part tells of the eternal life that comes to those who receive God's love.

The passages surrounding this statement assume God's being and action. God is not proved by wise human reasoning or brilliant logic. Trying to prove God exists is contradictory – God defines and determines us, not the other way around. We cannot contain God within our thoughts and considerations!

Secondly, God has loved and does love. Love is God's 'everything': God is love. God's primary statement is not one of domination, intelligence, naked force, amelioration or any other characteristics that we may find attractive.

Thirdly, the world is the object of God's love. God's love is not selective of any individual ethnic group or unique economic class. God's love is not a partial love for any special elite. God's love is universal.

Fourthly, we learn not only about God's being and disposition, we discover what God did and the basis for what God does: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The content of God's love is revealed. It is not open for negotiation nor is it subject to our whims and fancies. God has taken one action – God has given God's own self in his only Son and given him in love. God has indicated one remedy for one problem. God has declared God's own divine character and exposed our disastrous human condition. God has revealed that God is Father and that God's Son is eternally one with God. God has declared that his Son is Jesus of Nazareth, and that Jesus came from heaven and was raised like a serpent in the wilderness to shine light into and out of our darkness and to bring us from darkness into God's light. Anything else that flows from the action of God through his Son, however beneficial it may be, is built on this priority of God's love.

God's love is a gift

The love of God for everyone is God's gift. It is known by those who believe that God is, that God is love, that God loves the world, and that God's love for the world is God being Father and giving God's own self in his Son to the world. Believing this truth results in us loving our neighbours as ourselves.

God's love for and in his Son rescues the perishing and saves the condemned. The light of God in Christ has come into the world and shines in its darkness. Those committed to their unbelief 'hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed' while 'those who do what is true come to the

light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (John 3:19–21).

God's love is eternal life for those who believe in his Son. This life embraces and shares in the divine love which frees us from the judgement of our own darkness. It is a recognition that coming to the light and living in the light is only by God in us and not by our own efforts (John 3:21).

God's love is good news

To share in God's love is to be given to the world in God's Son so that other people may hear this good news. The best indication that we have heard this declaration is in our self-giving for others – not as a martyrdom for a cause, not to calm an angry God, but as a participation in the eternal purposes of God in Christ. Eternal life is consistent with God and God's self-revelation. God is love and God's love is revealed in God's gift of his Son. God offers no alternative to this love for God's world (John 3:22–36).

Psalm 2 warns us of the consequences of failing 'to serve the LORD with fear, with trembling' (Psalm 2:11). It tells of an intimacy between God and his Son that draws us to the only one who can save us. The third chapter of John reveals that God's Son was crucified, that he was elevated as a snake in the wilderness because of God's saving love for the world.

The psalmist sang: 'Happy are all who take refuge in him'. God's 'rod of iron' was his refusal to use any worldly coercive strategy to inherit the nations. God insisted that he would love the world in and through his Son, and that all else would fall aside and 'perish in the way' (Psalm 2:4–12). God's 'fury' is his unchangeable love coming to us in mercy and grace when we reject him in bitterness and anger (John 3:19–21). Taking refuge in God is receiving his message that he 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16).

The Father loves the Son

John 3:22–36

The one from above

The ‘discussion about purification ... between John’s disciples and a Jew’ focused attention on Jesus. John the Baptist pointed out that purification must come from heaven and that Jesus was the Messiah who would provide it as the bridegroom of the people of God. Jesus was the ‘one who comes from above’ and who would increase in messianic authority, while John’s profile would decrease (John 3:25–31).

John’s Gospel began by affirming that John the Baptist ‘was not the light, but came to testify to [Jesus as] the light’. Jesus would conquer darkness because the light of his life would bring people into his Father’s family (John 1:1–10).

This emphasis on Jesus’ ministry increasing was further emphasised when John the Baptist identified himself as the ‘voice of one crying in the wilderness’, quoting from Isaiah 40:3. He said he was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandal because although Jesus came after him, Jesus ranked ahead of him.

John the Baptist declared Jesus as the Son of God who baptises in and by the Spirit, and on whom the Spirit descended ‘from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him’. It was in this context that John the Baptist declared Jesus to be ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:19–36).

It is hard not to see parallels with the creation narrative of Adam and Eve’s royal and priestly vocation. This parallel is reinforced with Jesus’ call of his disciples and his comment to Nathanael that Nathanael would ‘see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man’. Jesus believed that the gates of the eternal Eden were open to him as Messiah-Lamb-Son of God. He was declaring himself to be the fulfilment of Moses and the prophets – to be *the* prophet, *the* word, and *the* voice of God (John 1:35–51; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15).

The account of the wedding at Cana and John’s comments about Jesus as bridegroom are reminders of the Genesis description of Eve’s companionship with Adam as his wife. Jesus later declared that there were many rooms in his Father’s house to share with a bride washed clean of immorality and impurity (John 4:1ff, 8:1ff, 14:1ff; cf. Revelation 7:13ff, 19:6ff, 21:1ff).

The Spirit without measure

The Gospel writer described Jesus as being ‘above all’ and that Jesus’ testimony about eternity was known only to Jesus and his Father. Jesus’ testimony was rejected by those who limited themselves to ‘earthly things’ (John 3:31ff). Earthly things are to be understood from God’s heavenly viewpoint, rather than by

extrapolating from earthly things to explore heavenly ones or by seeing them through lenses of shame and failure. Revelation and reason are different and compatible, but not identical. Earthly things as created are good, beautiful and functional.

As was outlined in the introduction to John's Gospel, those who receive Jesus' testimony know that 'God is true' because Jesus faithfully witnesses to the being of God, and God is authentic within God's-self (John 1:11, 12, cf. 3:33). Jesus is the life and truth of his Father, as well as the way to his Father (cf. John 14:6; Revelation 1:1ff, 19:11ff).

Jesus 'speaks the words of God [as God's Word], for he gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34; cf. 1:1, 2, 14). Jesus communicated not only in the power and presence of the Spirit as a human person, but as God with us, as the word of God become flesh. The reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit implies that the Holy Spirit testifies regarding the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son, and of the Spirit's relationship with them (John 3:33–35). Jesus knew the Spirit's testimony to the Father's Word. God is three persons in one and not two in one, and the relationship of the Father and the Son is one of love – of love exercised in affirmation and authority, in and with and by the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son.

It is this love in these eternal divine relationships that comprises the heavenly things which God the Father declares to humanity in and through his Son, and which are validated by the testimony and witness of the Spirit: 'the Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands' (John 3:35). The authority of the Son is in his Father's love for him. The Father's love for Jesus establishes Jesus as God's king, priest and prophet in creation.

Jesus rules by giving his own fullness in 'grace upon grace' and truth upon truth (John 1:16). This self-giving is Jesus' royal and priestly glory, the fullness of his sonship, and so is the revelation of God, a revelation that is otherwise unknown and unknowable (John 1:14–18). It is this grace and truth which comes to those who believe, and which gives eternal life. It is this same grace and truth which disobedient and unbelieving people endure as God's wrath. Jesus' sovereignty is in his action and words of grace and truth (John 3:33–36, cf. John 3:17–21).

Jesus spoke the word of God as the Word of God as the one whom God had sent. His person was the message in and through what he said and did, and what he said and did was by the Holy Spirit according to the will of God. Grace and truth were not therefore external to him. Rather, grace and truth *were* who he was and what he did – and remain still the same today!

Citizens of the kingdom and worshippers in the temple

Nicodemus had come to see Jesus and acknowledged that Jesus was 'a teacher who has come from God'. Jesus had told him of the message he had from God that

being a citizen of God's kingdom means being born of the Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that God was establishing a renewed, re-born humanity 'from above' by the same Holy Spirit who would lead and direct this new community (John 3:1–12).

This new birth would give the eternal life that comes to those who believe in what Jesus accomplished by being 'lifted up' in the wilderness of the desolated deserts of human decadence and death. At Golgotha, far removed from Eden, the love of Jesus' heavenly Father for the world is in the generosity of God in his Son, and in the love of God's Son in offering himself as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world (John 3:13–16) – and in the Spirit of the love of the Father and his Son (cf. John 3:1ff, 34).

The woman at the well was told of eternally satisfying living water – streams flowing from an eternal Eden – coming to her in and by the Holy Spirit from the fountainhead of God through his Son. She washed herself in this fountain knowing it to be the only place where all her troubles could be cleansed and restored. Jesus not only told her everything about herself and revealed who he was to her, he told her that she was free to be a true worshipper in this eternal Eden for 'the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4:21–26).

Jesus came by the power of the Spirit to establish the kingdom of God and the true worship of its citizens as the temple 'of his body'. This transformation was opened to Nicodemus, as he came to learn that the old temple and the old kingdom were passing away (John 2:13–3:25). The people of God, freed from their adulteries and idolatries with and in the world receive Jesus as Christ and Messiah and have their relationships redefined, renewed and restored. The original charter given to the first couple in Eden for this creation is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is our Lord and Messiah for this life and the life of the world to come! Jesus, as the Samaritans recognised, 'is truly the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42).

Go, and sin no more

John 8:2–11

Where are they?

This is one of the most well-known Gospel stories, with Jesus' statements part of common phraseology.³³ Whatever the woman's guilt, the Pharisees were guilty of serious sins. They were prepared to stone her to death in their intense opposition and hostility to Jesus. They wanted to arrest him, and the welfare of the woman mattered little, if anything, to them.

Jesus exposed their motives and convicted them to the point where they – beginning with the elders – desisted from their intentions to accuse her and trick him. Although they came under judgement for their actions, Jesus was merciful to them. He stood in the way of their treachery and diverted it, protecting not only the woman, but the leaders themselves. Their evil intention was thwarted, and the woman was spared. His action stood in the way of their unrighteous anger (cf. Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2, 4:10).

Yet his mercy in sparing them from the full force of their plan was also their judgement. By showing the Pharisees and the woman they brought with them his mercy, he condemned their ecclesiastical campaign to charge him with an offence. He also exposed their unrighteous hostility towards her. As Jesus' later trial showed, they were not very interested in fair justice. They were ruthless tyrants and spiritual bullies, stopping at little in achieving their goals.

The woman's case for mercy appeared weak as she had allegedly been caught committing adultery. The male-only leadership group did not bring the man she was apparently with to Jesus. Jesus did not examine their allegation, which may have been false. The father in the first part of Proverbs repeatedly warned his son to keep away from the kind of person this woman was alleged to be (Proverbs 5:1–23; 6:20–7:27, cf. the wisdom woman of Proverbs 8 and 9 and the woman of Proverbs 31:1–31), while many Old Testament prophets wrote against sexual immorality in the context of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

Has no one condemned you?

Jesus was firstly concerned with their evil, not her alleged failure. It was only after they had gone that he spoke to her:

‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’ (John 8:10, 11).

³³ John 7:53–8:11 is an ancient document not in the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel. It rings true of Jesus' concern for vulnerable people – including all women who were by default marginalised.

No Pharisee had true moral authority to condemn her: they were guilty either of the same sin, for shameless plots to trap him or for various other things (cf. Matthew 7:1–6). Jesus did not say her condemnation was inappropriate, nor that he lacked authority to condemn her, he simply did not condemn her. His question to her set the context for his statement that he would not condemn her. Having been called on by the community's leaders to sit in judgement, his judgement had authority beyond that of him as one person. Because of who he *was*, it also carried divine as well as human authority (cf. Romans 8:28–39).

The Gospel of John describes God's love for the world in giving his Son and explains that God sent Jesus for salvation not condemnation. Condemnation is unnecessary since unbelief in 'the only Son of God' was self-condemning:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (John 3:16–21).

Jesus is later recorded as saying something similar. Judgement during his ministry was not relevant – Jesus had come 'to save the world' and what he had taught would be adequate testimony on the last day when judgement would occur. Jesus insisted that he had spoken according to what his Father had commanded him to say and not according to any self-derived insights (John 12:44–50).

Jesus wrote in the sand twice before speaking. His writing in the sand may have symbolised a written as well as a spoken judgement, emphasising his authority. He may have written some words indicating God's mercy and warning of God's judgement (e.g. Exodus 23:7, 34:6, 7). On the first occasion, Jesus waited while they demanded an answer from him. Prior to speaking alone with the woman, he waited until they responded by leaving her with him.

While Jesus' mercy to her is obvious, there was judgement in his mercy. His verdict was that every day after this ordeal would be a day lived free from the condemnation of the severity of the Pharisee's lethal punishment. Yet, in Jesus' promise that she would not be condemned, there was also a warning. In each day that she was to receive as a fresh gift of freedom, she was to 'sin no more' (John 8:11 KJV). She was not to live in darkness but to live in his light. She was to be released from deadly guilt and evil and live in his liberty and life. While the fact of any past sinfulness would remain in her memory, its power was cancelled, its pollution was cleansed, and its penalty was paid.

Mercy and judgement are inseparable

While some condemnation might seem appropriate, especially regarding the Pharisees, Jesus' judgement showed mercy, with his mercy offering fruitful new life while also exposing evil and declaring judgement on it.

We are not told of the woman's life after this, but we do know that the Pharisees fulfilled their evil intentions and crucified Jesus. His cross became their judgement; and their evil was seen for what it was. Even more, it was condemned in his dying body. His mercy exposed their self-serving cruelty and offered forgiveness to all – as one of the thieves crucified with him realised. Jesus did not die for mere 'nothingness'. He died for the sins of the world. Only because of his death on the cross could he promise anyone – including the woman and the Pharisees – freedom from guilt and shame.

The cross declares great mercy, great grace, great forgiveness, great pardon and great love. We can know that God's divine mercy brings joy to misery because of Jesus' death on the cross. We can know forgiveness from sin and guilt, and freedom from sin's bondage because of Jesus' death on the cross.

We can see that his death reveals the judgment of grace and so brings holiness to the defiled, life to the dead and love to the hateful. It is best to see our awareness of personal failure in terms of what God *has* forgiven in Christ rather than in terms of what must now be forgiven.

With God there is no partiality – either in judgement or in offering mercy. Only in the inexplicable mystery of the transcendent sovereignty of God and the irrationality and folly of sin is there any possible reason why one person responds to and another rejects God's goodness and mercy. The urgency is clear. God's grace is not to be treated lightly, God's mercy is not to be trifled with and God's holiness and love are not to be ignored (cf. Jeremiah 6:14; Romans 2:1–11). While houses of sin are 'the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death', Jesus promised this woman life from the dead regardless of her story: 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (Proverbs 7:27; John 8:11).

The raising of Lazarus

John 11:17–44

Jesus is the resurrection and the life

The story of Lazarus reveals a little of what it means for Jesus to raise the dead. It shows the belief and unbelief of Mary and Martha, who could accept that Jesus was the ‘Messiah, the Son of God’, and that there is a resurrection ‘on the last day’, but not that Jesus could raise Lazarus *that* day! It also shows the unbelief of others who were there (John 11:23–27, 37).

Jesus asked Martha whether she believed that ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25, 26). Jesus was saying that if Martha and those with her had believed him then their response to Lazarus’ death and his arrival would have been different. Jesus did not want them locked into Mary’s understanding that if he had been there then her ‘brother would not have died’ (John 11:32). Jesus had not failed because Lazarus was dead. Jesus had arrived and Lazarus would live!

Death awaits all of us. As fallen humanity, we deserve to die (cf. Genesis 2:17, 3:3). Jesus did not ignore this reality. He exposed a deeper and richer divine purpose and plan! He revealed a love stronger than death (cf. Song of Solomon 8:6). He conquered death by his death and ‘swallowed [death] up in victory’ – the victory given by God ‘through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 15:51–57; Romans 8:31–39).

Paul wrote to Timothy about the grace God had initiated and assigned to them from before creation and which had

now been revealed through 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).

Resurrection is not simply something that Jesus *does*. He *is* the ‘resurrection and the life’ (John 11:25). The dead are raised when the depths of God in the depths of Jesus embrace the defiance and deceit of human evil and destroy death from within humanity – and do so forever.

Jesus wept

Jesus ‘was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved’ on seeing Mary weeping. Jesus began to weep as they took him to the grave where Lazarus had been placed. Faced with the unbelief of those who questioned why he had not prevented Lazarus’ death, and coming to the tomb, Jesus was ‘again greatly disturbed’ (John 11:33–38).

His emotions involved more than sympathy with friends and sharing in their loss. They were deeper than a response to the criticism that he had been unable to keep Lazarus from dying. The statement that he was ‘greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved’ means that he was agitated at seeing death’s impact on humanity. He saw the image of God damaged by decay and knew what must happen to him for it to be resurrected. He was determined that the death of Lazarus would help in revealing this truth to those present.

Mary and the others wept with sorrow at the terror of death, but Jesus’ tears expressed something far stronger than even his love for Lazarus (John 11:33–40). Jesus’ tears related to his indignation concerning the unbelief of the Jews and the partial belief of the sisters, and to death’s dominance over them.

After this we twice read of Jesus being ‘troubled’. When a group of Greek people came to see him, he said

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

The same word is used when he told his disciples that one of them would betray him (John 12:27–33, 13:20–30). He then urged his disciples to believe in God and not to let *their* hearts be troubled (John 14:1).

This description of Jesus’ interaction with those responding to Lazarus’ death has similarities with Luke’s record of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, where Jesus was determined that he would press on to his own death. *Jesus* was dying in the garden, not Lazarus. His own death at Golgotha was present to him in Gethsemane, yet his resolve was not diminished (Matthew 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46).

Seeing the glory of God

Jesus was in deep communion with his Father as he confronted human death. He knew that he was to be ‘lifted up’ so that God’s glory would be seen not only in his resurrection, but in the lives of those who would believe in him (John 12:27–33). He, the Lord of life, linked Lazarus’ death with the glory of God, and waited until Lazarus had died before going to Bethany.

Other people assumed he was going to the tomb to share in their – and Lazarus’ sisters’ – grief. But Jesus went to the tomb to raise Lazarus from the dead and so show that death itself is dead in the presence of the one who is the resurrection and the life.

Jesus’ intention was to deal with the grim reality of death forever by his own death and so reveal the saving and restorative love of God. He did not act out a cultured human ideal. His suffering redeems humanity and renews creation (cf. Luke 19:41). The Jews were somewhat correct concerning his love for Lazarus but misunderstood his mission (cf. John 11:49–52).

Jesus' tears of indignation found their focus in the question he asked Mary: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' This glory was seen firstly in his communion with his Father and secondly in the impact that this communion had on Lazarus (John 11:39–44). It is ultimately seen in his own death and resurrection (John 12:20–43, 17:1–26).

Those who believe in me will live

It has been suggested that if Jesus did not call Lazarus by name, then all the dead would have come out! Jesus gave three instructions concerning Lazarus. He told them to take away the stone, he commanded Lazarus to come out, and then he directed those present to unbind him and let him go. By contrast, in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection, the stone was rolled away, showing that he was already raised. No-one commanded him to come out, except the Father, and no-one needed to untie him and set him free.

However magnificent the resurrection of Lazarus was, he died again to be raised on the last day. His resurrection caused no-one else to be raised from the dead. Jesus' resurrection, by contrast, was the first of many (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). He is the resurrection and the life: 'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die' (John 11:25, 26). This is the life of which Paul wrote in Romans 8:10–17.

It is a life of eternal certainty of which John also wrote when seeing a vision of the risen and ascended Jesus and falling before him as though he had died. Jesus' assurance to John was that fear was not needed since '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 1:17–19).

Jesus – lifted up

John 12:20–42

The gathering

Of the many people who were in Jerusalem for the Passover, quite a number would have had more than a passing interest in Jesus' ministry and his messianic claims. One group of Greeks approached Philip asking to see Jesus. We are not told of their motivation, but Paul later commented that Greek people were interested in seeking wisdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17–31; Acts 17:16ff). Jesus linked the inquiry of this group with his understanding that 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. Jesus' view of glory was quite different from that of wise scholars (John 12:20–26).

Jesus' own disciples were struggling with what Jesus was saying and what was happening, as the discussion that followed indicates (John 13–16, e.g. 13:1ff, 13:36ff, 14:5, 16:16ff). The crowd thought his Father's voice was thunder or perhaps an angel speaking. They did not understand Jesus' explanation of the parable of the grain of wheat and could not see how the Son of Man or the Messiah could die in the way Jesus nominated. The result of their unbelief in Jesus although 'he had performed so many signs in their presence' was that 'he departed and hid from them' (John 12:36b–37).

The faithlessness of the unbelieving crowd – despite the adulation of many as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey after raising Lazarus – contrasts with the rich results of Jesus' ministry (John 12:12–19, 37–43).

The authorities included some who were not ready to confess their belief in Jesus. The intensity of the rulers' opposition to Jesus had increased with the raising of Lazarus (John 11:45–57, 12:9–11) and was further focused by his entry into Jerusalem (John 12:19). Their interest in Jesus was linked with 'human glory more than the glory that comes from God' (John 12:42, 43).

His Father's voice

After Jesus commented about the grain of wheat dying and then bearing much fruit, he revealed something of the horror that awaited him, and his resolve to glorify his Father in it. He could ask his Father to save him from what was ahead. He was not being coerced or forced in any way to the cross. This was the reason for his coming from the Father to live among them, and it was the way home again – not only for himself, but for all those who would believe in him. It was the way of eternal life and truth (John 12:50, 14:1–11).

Jesus' sharing that his soul was troubled, his prayer that his Father's name be glorified, and his Father's voice from heaven, all showed those gathered what God was about in the events that were at hand (John 12:30). The communion and love of the Father and the Son was transparent. The Father made it clear that his glory

was in his Son, and so the Father was honouring his Son, just as his Son was glorifying him (cf. John 1:1, 14, 18). The hour had come for both the Father and the Son to be glorified – and by each other (John 12:23–28).

This glory relates to fruitfulness and eternal life – both of which would come by his death (John 12:24, 25, 50). This must mean that the love of the Father and the Son is stronger than death – even death by crucifixion (John 12:27–30; cf. Song of Solomon 8:6). Their unbreakable communion judged this world and its ruler (John 12:31). As Jesus pointed out, this judgement goes to the depths of who he was and why he came (John 12:27; Matthew 26:31–35).

Judgement on worldly glory

The crowd knew what Jesus meant by being ‘lifted up’ (John 12:32–34). They saw this as contradicting Old Testament prophecies concerning a messianic Son of Man. They could not see how humanity would come together by Jesus being crucified, and yet that was what Jesus was saying to them.

Jesus must have meant that all humanity was somehow gathered at his cross for judgement, and that this judgement reveals how far apart people are from each other and from God (cf. Matthew 11:25–30). Jesus’ relationship with his Father not only brought judgement but *was* the judgement (cf. John 1:19–36; Luke 1:15–22).

Those present did not see this and did not accept Jesus as anointed Son of Man. Jesus did not argue with them, he was clear about who he was and urged them to ‘believe in the light, so that you may become children of light’ (John 12:35, 36). He saw his being ‘lifted up’ as ‘judgement of this world’ and its prince – and so of its ‘glories’, which were not very glorious! His being ‘lifted up’ was his Father’s plan in which he – as his Father’s Son – was willingly active (John 12:16–50; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18–31).

Living in God’s glory

What is true for Jesus is true for those who follow him. Selfish love and the love of God are mutually exclusive (John 12:25, 26). To love God is to keep our lives for eternal life (and not for this world). It is to live a life which enfolds and embraces us in God’s love for us. To love God is to be fruitful as his fruit, cleansed by his word (John 15:1–25).

Serving and following Jesus means being with him where he is: in his suffering, in his death and in his resurrection life. It means being honoured by the Father, and so, by implication, not always being honoured by other people (John 12:26, 43). Children of the light walk in the light and know where they are going. They are not overtaken by darkness (John 12:35, 36, cf. John 1:1–9). This darkness is the darkness of death, of coming under judgement for not believing in the eternal life

and light that Jesus came to give. Being overcome by darkness results from not believing his word

for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me (John 12:44–50).

This outcome is just as Isaiah understood the impact of the revelation of God's glory (Isaiah 6:1–8). Those who believe can expect to experience the same rejection as the servant who suffers with them and for them (Isaiah 6:9–13, 52:13–53:12).

Suffering is not ultimately futile. It brings much fruit (John 12:24–26, 15:1–25). The Father's children will be gathered. His family will live in his light for eternity. They will pass through his judgements and be liberated from the empty glories of this world – as the Old Testament prophecies so richly indicate (e.g. Isaiah 43:1ff). They will know and live in the everlasting love and faithfulness of God (Jeremiah 31:1–40, Isaiah 42:1–20, 49:1–7, 60:1–22, etc.).

Jesus' statement that he would gather everyone to himself when he was 'lifted up from the earth' refers to God's family being gathered for eternity in God's new earthly paradise (Isaiah 25:1–12; Revelation 19–22).

He saw his glory John 12:36b–50

A grain of wheat

This passage is this Gospel's last record of Jesus' public ministry. It follows Mary anointing Jesus in the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the donkey focused the people's confidence that Jesus was coming 'in the name of the Lord' (John 12:13). The religious leaders already wanted to kill both Lazarus and Jesus (John 12:9–11)!

It was in this context that some Greeks came to see Jesus. Jesus responded by saying that he would produce abundant fruit after dying like a wheat-grain (John 12:23, 24). He insisted on this being the reason for his coming – even given the trauma he was experiencing. His Father would be glorified when he was 'lifted up' because '*now* is the judgement of this world', '*now* the ruler of this world will be driven out' and 'all people will be drawn unto me' (John 12:27–32, italics added).

Jesus contrasted walking in and believing in the light with being 'overtaken' and being lost in the darkness. To walk in the light was to be where Jesus was. The Father answered Jesus' request that his Father glorify Jesus' name by a 'voice from heaven'. To walk in the light is to be in harmony with the Father's glorifying of his Son in his Son's ministry and sacrificial death (John 12:27–36).

Unbelief

Jesus went away into hiding after this incident because of their unbelief in the 'many signs' he did when he was with them (John 12:36b, 37).

Jesus' signs are explained in the same way as Mark's Gospel describes Jesus' use of parables. According to Jesus, the parables were given so that they would look but not see and listen without understanding 'so that they may not turn again and be forgiven' presumably without a genuine change of mind and attitude (Mark 4:12).

Jesus' signs are explained in this passage by referring to Isaiah 6 and 53. Isaiah 6:1–8 records Isaiah seeing 'the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robed filled the temple'. When the seraphs called to one another 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory', the foundations of the temple were shaken, and the temple was filled with smoke. Isaiah's confession was that although he was unclean and lost, as were the people among whom he lived, he had 'seen the King, the LORD of hosts'. After one of the seraphs touched his lips with a coal from the altar and declared that his guilt was gone and that his sin was blotted out, the LORD asked who would go and speak to his people concerning what God has just revealed of himself to Isaiah! Isaiah volunteered, only to learn that the more he told the people, the less they would hear – until God's judgement left only 'the holy seed' (Isaiah 6:13). Isaiah's understanding was

there would be no repentance without judgement, even though judgement would not guarantee repentance.

No wonder Isaiah 53 begins by asking who believed what the prophet had heard from God and declared to the people about the LORD's power and provision. Perhaps Isaiah 52 and 53 reveal something of the sacrifice that was offered on the altar referred to in Isaiah 6, with the holiness and glory of Isaiah 6 linked to the LORD's servant bearing the people's iniquity (Isaiah 53:6).

It was God's servant who was traumatised because of the evil the people of God were doing while he refused to be violent or deceitful. It was the LORD's will that he sacrificed his life to purge sin. It was the LORD's will that he would nonetheless somehow see his descendants and enjoy a long life 'and that through him the will of the LORD shall prosper' (Isaiah 53:8–10).

It was this servant of whom it was declared that

Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

It was this servant who would be assigned place with the powerful and a share of their wealth after having 'poured out himself to death' by being counted with and making intercession for sinners and lawbreakers (Isaiah 53:11, 12).

What John saw fulfilled was not simply the unbelief of people who heard the Father's voice as thunder or as an angel, nor was it only Jesus doing his Father's will and work by giving them signs. Nor was it limited to giving them the signs as God's judgements on their unbelief for still loving human glory more than God's glory. John realised that something more remarkable was occurring, just as he mentioned at the beginning of his book (John 1:1–18).

Belief

True belief in Jesus, according to Jesus, was not in Jesus alone but in his Father who had sent him (John 12:44). Those who remain in the darkness are those who reject *this* Jesus. Their judge is the word that Jesus spoke in saving and giving life. This word of eternal life came from Jesus' lips and in his being the Word become flesh. This word was his life, his vocation, his death, his resurrection and his ascension, and is his current humanity in the triune God.

The people could accept *their* Jesus, but not *the Father's* Jesus. The religious leaders could neither accept the Father who sent Jesus, nor the word that Jesus spoke nor the signs that he did (John 12:49). These leaders knew that the *who* determined the *what* and the *how*. They had asked him 'Who is this Son of Man?' because they wanted to confront him about what he was doing and how he was working (John 12:34)!

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

True belief sees Jesus glorifying his Father. It sees his Father glorified in his Son and so glorifies the Father and sees the Father's glory revealed in the death of Jesus Christ. It is a belief not based on the Father acting *against* Jesus, but *with, in* and *through* Jesus. It is a belief that is not solitary or isolated. Not remaining in the darkness and coming into the light is permanent, just as it was for Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah's encounter with God encapsulated his life-long vocation: 'He saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him' (John 12:41).

By being 'lifted up' in his crucifixion, Jesus was drawing humanity to himself. By being 'lifted up' from the grave and 'lifted up' to heaven, those whom he drew to himself on the cross remain eternally drawn to him. Paul's declaration that we are 'hid with Christ in God' means that we have no life other the current life of Christ, and that his life is not remote from us (Colossians 3:3). Our first confession should be our last confession, and our last confession our continual confession:

Lord Jesus, in you we see the Father who sent you to lift us up with you in your death. We confess that, of ourselves, we are filled with unbelief and that unless you draw us to yourself, we would no more turn to you today than any other day.

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we confess that unless you had drawn us to yourself in your beloved and only Son we would not be healed from our unbelief. Father, you heal even our unbelief that presumes that, with you having come to us in Jesus Christ, we can now believe of ourselves and so love and serve you from ourselves and by ourselves. We ask you to show us that you have given us no hands with which to serve but Jesus' nail-pierced hands, no feet with which to walk but Jesus' nail-pierced feet, no side from which to share but Jesus' speared side, and no Holy Spirit to breathe but the Holy Spirit in and by whom Jesus offered himself to you and by whom you raised him from the dead, and no life but his life – now seated as a human person at your right hand where, with you and the Holy Spirit, he intervenes for us, and from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son, we thank you that Messiah Jesus, the Father's anointed Son, remains forever with you and the Father as glorified humanity, and that you come to us as intercessor, advocate and comforter so that we should love no human glory other than in the Lamb of God to whose marriage supper you invite us with all who hold the testimony of Jesus and worship his God and Father.

My Father is the vine-grower

John 15:1–17

The true vine

Jesus would have known Old Testament prophecies about God's people as a vine, and that in many, if not all, of these prophecies, the vine was under judgement for not bearing good fruit. The prophets understood these judgements as God's response to personal and national disobedience. In other words, God had done and would do more pruning and cleansing of his vine. Mentions of the people of God as God's vine include:

- Psalm 80. This psalm is a prayer for the revival of the vine that God brought out from Egypt. God had cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, but now its walls were broken and its fruit was not harvested. The vine was burned with fire and God's people perished. Only God could revive his people so that they would call on his name. The psalmist prayed that God would 'look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted' (Psalm 80:14, 15).
- Isaiah 5:1–7. The prophecy contains a love-song-lament of the way in which a vineyard was made into a wasteland and was neither pruned nor cultivated. Originally the vineyard – identified as the nation of Israel – was richly cultivated, but when harvest time came the owner hoped for good grapes 'but it yielded wild grapes' (Isaiah 5:2).
- Jeremiah 2:21. Jeremiah wrote that God planted Israel 'as a choice vine, from the purest stock' and asked how Israel degenerated into a 'wild vine'.
- Ezekiel 15:1–8. Ezekiel prophesied that God would treat the citizens of Jerusalem like vine-wood, which was only burnt as it was useless for making anything.
- Hosea 10:1–3. Hosea described Israel as 'a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit' but that as its fruit increased, Israel engaged in more and more false worship, resulting in divine judgement.

Jesus contrasted himself with Israel by declaring himself as God's true vine. He spoke about himself as the source and life of the people of God, not as the reason for its exile. He indicated that he alone stood in true relationship with God. His statement was as radical as his other 'I am' sayings in John's Gospel.

True branches

Just as the book of Isaiah interweaves prophecies of the suffering servant with references to the nation of Israel and a Messiah, Jesus identified himself and his sufferings with past prophecies of Israel as God's vine. Jesus was declaring that

Israel's sufferings ultimately made sense in himself and what he was accomplishing. Moreover, he pointed to a new congregation, to a new and renewed Israel, living as his branches and bearing 'much fruit' (John 15:5).

The significance of this emphasis on fruit should not be ignored or underestimated. Israel was again under foreign domination. Social injustice was prevalent under these military and taxation regimes. Religious oppression resulted from political alliances and ecclesiastical priorities. Jesus' agenda for national cleansing, prosperity and righteousness flowed from his heavenly Father as vine-grower. If there was any need to improve the vine, then that task first belonged to the vine-grower. Jesus' message about being the vine indicates that

- His Father is true and holy and ensures that his vine is true and holy. God always has in mind the revelation and realisation of holiness and cleansing. Jesus' emphasis was on the harvest and its fruit. God's goal is fruitfulness and not pruning.
- The upper room discourse indicates that Jesus and his Father are one in action and purpose in contrast to the prophetic portrayal of Israel as God's vine. Pruning or removing branches does not indicate any disunity between the Father and Jesus – or the Holy Spirit.
- Pruning is promised, just as in Old Testament prophecies. Some branches will be removed, and some will be prepared for bearing clean fruit. Since it is the Father who prunes in harmony with his Son and the Holy Spirit, his discernment can be trusted and abiding in Jesus can be relied upon.
- The essence of this abiding in the vine is the love that flows between the Father and the Son, and through Jesus to those who obey God's commands. Abiding in Jesus means abiding in his Father and receiving the fruits of Messiah's obedience: his joy, his glory, his peace, etc.
- To abide in Jesus is to know God's purification of all evil on the cross. The death of Jesus is not an action against Jesus, but an action in, with and by Jesus against evil. The removal of branches and the pruning of the vine occurs 'by the word that I have spoken to you' (John 15:3).
- The vine metaphor with its references to pruning and removal of branches does not license parents or religious and other authorities ('fathers') to cut and prune those of whom they claim oversight. Jesus described himself as the vine and not the vine-grower! Jesus' consistent message was that leaders were not to be dominating and demeaning demi-gods but were to care for people by identifying and suffering with them as servants. The surgery of Calvary is by sacrifice and not severity; it cleanses, not criticises.

True love and true glory

When Jesus spoke of the vine and vine-grower, he was referring to his imminent death. He told his disciples that because of his unity with his Father and his identification with humanity as a man that he would experience the consequences of evil's action against him and his Father. He was reminding them that the Son of Man was about to be glorified and that wheat grains do not produce new wheat without being buried and dying. He was impressing on them that his death and subsequent glory meant this world-system's judgement, the eviction of its ruler and a new gathering of humanity under Jesus' authority (John 12:23–32).

This judgement was the pruning: it was the rejection by the vine and its vine-grower of this world's ruler, and anything aligned with its evil empires. It was not action by the Father against his Son, or against anyone. Rejection results from those who encounter the vine's life-giving sap and isolate themselves from its cleansing, replenishing and renewing nourishment.

His message was therefore encouragement, an affirming that they were already cleansed through the messages he had shared with them (John 15:3). He wanted them to comprehend his mission and to grasp the absolute significance of who he was and what he was doing. He wanted them to see his Father's glory, and his glory with his Father, revealed in and through his sufferings.

Jesus had told his disciples that 'I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he'. He later added that 'I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe' (John 13:19, 14:29, cf. 16:12). He told them what they could comprehend: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ... No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:9, 13). It was this word to them – from the Father – that declared them already clean (cf. 1 John 2:2, 4:10).

Jesus shared the purpose of his oncoming hours of darkness with them. He valued them as friends and not as servants. The upper-room discourse was aimed to teach them that both he and his Father were at work in the confusion that followed. Their priority was that Jesus' disciples knew that his Father had sent him for that precise time, and that when he – the Son – had shown that he had overcome the world, his disciples would know that he would be leaving the world and going back to the Father. Jesus' disciples would not be orphaned – their grief would turn to permanent joy and their sorrow would become the joy of knowing and living in a full and fruitful relationship together with God.

Jesus' prayer following this discourse expanded and developed these themes. He prayed for his disciples to be safe in himself and his Father so that the world could believe that his Father had sent him. He trusted himself to his Father's holiness and righteousness and asked for his Father to glorify him in his Father's presence with the same glory he had known prior to creation (John 17:5).

This prayer reflects and enlarges on Jesus' words concerning the vine and the vine-grower. It shows the way he prayed for them while they were in the world, so indicating his confidence in their remaining in the vine, even given the turmoil that was ahead. It reveals that they would have eternal life by knowing God as Father and Jesus as his Messiah.

True fruit

Jesus proposed no separate means of national political, economic or social deliverance. He indicated that he had come with the express purpose of taking personal and national judgement as true humanity. This, he declared, was God's great act, his gracious love-gift. He asked his disciples to accept his testimony and abide in him, and so be cleansed and fruitful. Otherwise, he told them, they could achieve nothing. All that would be left was withering on the rubbish heap in preparation for the incinerator.

This fruitful cleansing was the essence of the reign of God, of the spiritual birth about which Nicodemus had heard. This was the eternal life that comes from the Son of Man being 'lifted up' as a snake in the desert. This was the love of God that loved the world so much that God 'gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:14–16).

Although Jesus did not directly mention the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the discussion of the vine-grower, it would be remiss to bypass the continual references to the Holy Spirit in Jesus' discourse. It seems reasonable to conclude that the Holy Spirit effects the union of the branches with the vine and conveys the life of the vine to the branches. Jesus indicated that the Holy Spirit would be with them forever as counsellor and comforter:

the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:26).

Later in this discourse, Jesus explained that 'the Spirit of truth' would lead them into the truth concerning what was about to occur. The Spirit would do this by sharing what the Spirit heard. This Spirit-sharing would glorify Jesus by affirming that the Father had given everything to his Son (John 16:13–15).

The Holy Spirit's testimony to Jesus is even more potent since he is the one whom God gave to Messiah without limit (John 3:34–36). Throughout all Jesus' life, and in his death, the Holy Spirit flowed to and through him from his Father as the fountain of living water. So significant was his presence with Jesus that Jesus declared that whoever was thirsty could come to him and drink of, and overflow with, the Spirit when Jesus was glorified (cf. John 7:37–39).

The Holy Spirit's witness from the Father would establish and verify that worldly perspectives on sin, righteousness and judgement were inaccurate as they were not

based on faith in Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to his Father – all of which involved the rejection and condemnation of this world's ruler (John 16:8–11).

No wonder Jesus spoke of bearing fruit that lasts and of his Father giving us whatever we ask in his name in order that our joy would be complete. Such is the fruit of the Holy Spirit of which Jesus spoke. Such is the fruit that testifies to the world of who Jesus is (cf. Galatians 5:22, 23). Jesus had chosen them to bear this permanent fruit. He said he had chosen those whom his Father had given him; no-one chooses themselves!

There is great comfort in his choice because 'they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me' (John 15:21). Although persecution comes because we abide in the vine, we are still to be in the world, protected from the evil one, precisely to bear fruit in the world (cf. John 17:6–19). The new commandment to love consistent with Christ's love is so that everyone can identify with Jesus' disciples and be included in God's family. Jesus' prayer was that Christian unity would declare who he is, who sent him, and what depthless depths of love flow from God to the world. As Jesus said of the vine branches: 'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples' (John 15:8).

Jesus had turned water into wine at a wedding at Cana. Nicodemus had heard of being born of water and the Spirit. The multitudes had heard Jesus say that 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me' (John 6:57). Those at the feast had heard of the outpoured water of life (John 7:37–39). And now, in the centre of the last discourse is this mention of the vine and the vine-grower, and of our being those who, having received the protection of the Holy Father, having been given the Father's word and glory, and having received the love of the Father for his Son from before the creation of the world, now declare this life to the world. The fruit of the vine was the cup of wrath in Old Testament prophecies, but now, in Messiah Jesus, by God's mercy and grace and through the Holy Spirit's comfort, intercession and advocacy, it is the cup of blessing that we gratefully receive and share with others (Compare 1 Corinthians 10:16 with Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15; Revelation 14:10, 16;19 and Psalm 75:8).

John's Letters and Revelation

Living in the light and love of God

1 John 1:1–2:2, 4:7–21

Eternal life from God who is light and love

John's first letter begins with his testimony to his encounter with Jesus Christ. His witness was not a mere observation. Rather, it became a relationship with Jesus Christ and his Father-God. John declared that the message they had heard from Jesus and proclaimed to them was that 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5).

Jesus' light forgives sin and cleanses from unrighteousness. Faithfulness and truth issue in open communion and inter-personal relationships, both with God and among humanity. God's openness to John was a revelation initiated by God and realised in God's Son, Jesus.

John also developed a second theme. His beloved community was to be one of love 'because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God'. John insisted that not loving God meant not knowing God 'for God is love'. Just as the message of light had been personally delivered and received in Jesus as the 'word of life', so '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' (1 John 4:7–9).

The context of this second passage speaks of overcoming the world and its antichrist, and of being bold on judgement day because we are as acceptable to God as Jesus is while we live in this world (1 John 4:4, 17). This boldness means freedom from fear and burden. It is linked with keeping and obeying God's commandments and defeating the world (1 John 5:1–5). A constant focus in this letter is on eternal life through communion with God and in community with God's people.

Eternal life was revealed in and through God's Son:

And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life (1 John 5:11–12).

Living in the light means living in love and living in love involves living in the light. John's statements are strong: we do not love as God loves outside of being born of God and knowing God (1 John 4:7, 8). This understanding of light, love and life correlates with John's testimony that there is only darkness and death outside of the light and life of God (cf. 1 John 1:5).

Jesus atones for the world's sins, including our own

John identified humanity's crisis in terms of loving God:

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 4:10).

John did not write that we did not love God enough, or that we tried and failed, or that we loved God as best we could. He declared that we did not love God and that God, by contrast, loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. God not only came among us and revealed the truth of God to us; he dealt with our rebellion and established his love and light in our hearts (1 John 2:2, 4:10, cf. 1:6).

The terms ‘atoning sacrifice’ or ‘sacrifice of atonement’ are rarely mentioned in the New Testament (1 John 2:2, 4:10; Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17; cf. Luke 18:13). Yet their significance is great. John’s two references are pillars in his letter. Jesus Christ deals with the sins of the world and God’s light, love and life are revealed. The word of life came as the fullness of all that humanity was created to be. And not only did he come *to be* the atoning sacrifice for our sins, he *is* the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the world because of what he accomplished in his death and resurrection.

In between John’s statements about atoning sacrifice, he tackled the tragedy of human decadence and demonic darkness. He warned against loving the world system and its seeming substance. He alerted his readers to beware of ‘the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches’ (1 John 2:16). He wrote against lawlessness and warned about being deceived (1 John 3:4). Lawlessness and deceit produce a life given to immoral deeds – a life which can lead to hate and murder, as it did for Cain. John summarised these evil elements in one remarkable question:

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help (1 John 3:17)?

We can only be removed from this dismal unreality and its associated torment by Jesus Christ’s atoning sacrifice. We can be released from its bondage only because the love of the Father and the Son in this atonement calls us into new birth and new life as God’s children – attested to us by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 3:24, 4:1, 6, 13, 5:6).

At the centre of his letter, and in the middle of his account of human and demonic devastation, John exalted in being aware of the Father’s love for them in calling them God’s family. Lack of worldly recognition and acceptance fades away against already being God’s family and knowing that

what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

The dark pollution of unrighteousness is cleansed, the evil power of sin is destroyed, and the terrible penalty of disobedience is removed. The full magnificence of these realities will be seen when we see him as he is. We now face the terrible impact of evil with these tremendous truths, and we do so motivated

to prepare ourselves as a purified family awaiting the day when 'we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

An advocate *with* the Father *in* the Spirit

While our current crises and daily dilemmas are very real, the impact of Jesus' atoning sacrifice now and in eternity is thankfully much stronger. We are victorious because we are not alone in this struggle against worldliness and evil: God is in us and we are in God and 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4, 5).

John added that this mutual abiding is possible and known to us because of God's gift to us of God's Holy Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God (1 John 4: 13–15).

The climax of John's letter is a reminder that Jesus' incarnation as God's Son informs us of the truth about God so that we can know and abide in God and 'in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life'. It is on this basis that we can avoid idolatry (1 John 5:19–21, cf. 5:13).

It is 'Jesus Christ the righteous' who is in us and in whom we live, who is our 'advocate with the Father'. Not that the Father needs persuading! It was God's initiative of love towards us, while we did not love him, that established his Son's righteous advocacy for us (1 John 2:1, 4:10)! It is the Father and the Son who, with the Spirit, conquer the world, the flesh and the devil! This great atoning action was secured by Jesus Christ and is now effective in us. Together, with the Holy Spirit, and according to the Son's testimony – established by his water and blood – the Father and the Son confront evil, sin, guilt, darkness and filth (1 John 1:7, 5:6–9, cf. 3:8).

We can look to Jesus Christ – who came in the flesh and who became and so is the atoning sacrifice for our sins – to unfold true eternal life to us and in us. We can know this life while we await the passing of sin's presence and the arrival of the promised purification that establishes us for life beyond the day of judgement.

We can have true confidence and full assurance now in this destiny in him! We can be thankful that his holy, righteous, loving judgement for sin is over. We can be grateful and end any anger against God for refusing to endorse to our fallen agendas. We can cease our own hostility against ourselves, and against others who sin against us and against whom we sin.

The justice that heals

1 John 1:8–10

Forgiven and cleansed

John tells us that ‘If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:9). God is the one who forgives. He is pure light, with no darkness! His light is his splendour and glory, his integrity and truth, and his purity and holiness. It is the powerful and dynamic radiance of God’s being, of God’s life as Father, Son and Spirit that is shared in the giving, honouring and serving of divine unity and love.

God’s faithfulness suggests that God persists with us even in the face of our rebellion. Israel was taught that God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are ‘to all generations of those who fear him’ (Deuteronomy 5:10, 7:9). To speak of God’s justice in the context of God forgiving us hardly seems to fit together with love and faithfulness. Some forms of justice may seek punishment and vengeance; they may look for vindication and require restitution. If, though, the remediation, restoration and rehabilitation of offenders is crucial to human justice systems, how much more important are they to the divine schema?

John made it plain that ‘he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:9). This should leave us in no doubt at all about God’s plan in Christ. God will act justly, and his justice will be the fountain that washes us clean from our unrighteousness.

When the first couple sinned, Adam was told of the difficulties he would face in providing food for his family, and Eve of the pain that she would experience in motherhood. Cain, after slaying his brother Abel, declared to God that his punishment was more than he could bear. Yet even in this first biblical narrative, there are promises that tell us of God’s faithfulness and justice in forgiving and cleansing us from sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The serpent had been told that its head would be struck (Genesis 3:15)!

Abel was the first to prophecy: ‘he received approval as righteous’ through his ‘acceptable sacrifice’ (Hebrews 11:4). John implied that Abel loved his brother and that Abel’s deeds were righteous (1 John 3:11ff). Cain could not cope with this truth and killed his brother. He was angry and his countenance fell. Abel’s countenance was no doubt ‘lifted up’ and his heart and conscience were at peace because of God’s mercy and grace to him in the context of his bloody sacrifice on that first altar.

A better word

Paul wrote of Jesus mediating a ‘new covenant in [his] blood’; one that brings righteousness and cleansing as a gift through ‘the forgiveness of sins’ (1 Corinthians 11:25). The writer of Hebrews mentioned God’s new covenant when

contrasting the death of Abel with the death of Christ. The blood of Jesus was said to speak a better word than the blood of Abel. Abel had earlier been described as offering a 'more acceptable' sacrifice than Cain, so prefiguring the 'better word' that Christ's sacrifice brings (Hebrews 8:8ff, 9:15, 11:4, 12:24). Abel was slain to appease Cain's conscience. Jesus was slain by leaders to satisfy their consciences but was God's gift of himself to us (2 Corinthians 5:19; cf. Hebrews 10:22). Abel must have known something of the reality of John's message (1 John 1:9).

Just as Israel was told that God is the 'LORD who heals [salves] you', and that though God wounds, he also heals, so Jeremiah was not a prophet of doom and gloom (Exodus 15:16; Deuteronomy 32:39–43). Jeremiah saw that healing would come in the justice of God. He described the people's rebellion and the impending judgement (e.g. Jeremiah 2:1–13, 19–22, 26–28, 32–35), indicating that the priests and people were involved together (e.g. Jeremiah 5:30–31, 6:13–19). Jeremiah was no mere observer. With no joy and sick with grief the forlorn prophet lamented that

'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.' For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people (Jeremiah 8:18–9:1)!

The 'better word' of Hebrews 12:24 is not one of vengeance but victory, not one of malice but mercy, not one of severity but sacrifice, and not one of hostility but hope. The divine wounding is the self-inflicted disaster we experience in neglecting and rejecting God's salving balm.

Our deepest wounds are healed through his deepest surgery

Our wounds require more than bandages and sympathy. They require Messiah to come in the Spirit of the Lord and heal our deepest wounds by his deepest surgery. This was John's message about God's faithfulness and justice in forgiving and cleansing us. John warned against rejecting God's forgiveness and cleansing in his two surrounding statements (1 John 1:8–10). The miracle of God's faithfulness and justice in forgiving and cleansing us brings joy, community and life to those who walk in the light of God's love:

There's balm in the fountain of Calvary's Gilead,
There's healing from pain in the Cross of His love,
There's pardon that heals us, and purifies wholly;
There's peace for the conscience which comes from above.³⁴

³⁴ *New Creation Hymn Book*, 252.

See what love!

1 John 2:28–3:3

Love is revealed

Seeing can refer to discovering, visiting and experiencing. It can also indicate knowing, learning, understanding, marvelling and cherishing. The tense of the word used in this passage indicates that we are being asked to notice a past action. The context of the previous verses mentions – among other things – those who are born of the Father. The word for children indicates offspring and source rather than age.

The expression ‘See what love’ can be translated ‘See what kind of love’ (1 John 3:1 ESV). This love relates to its divine source and substance. The word used for love is *agape* and means that the initiative is with the other person, with love not based on the quality or merit of the recipient. This thought is consistent with being born of God (cf. 1 John 2:29).

It is intriguing that John burst into exhortation and doxology at this point of his letter, and that the theme of his praise is the Father’s love. Of the many verses in this letter which use *love* words, only three are prior to this one (1 John 2:5, 10, 15). 1 John 2:5 states that the love of God reaches its perfect goal in those who obey God’s word. 1 John 2:10 says that loving others in God’s family is living in the light and not stumbling. John commanded his readers not to ‘love the world or the things in the world ... for all that is in the world ... comes not from the Father but from the world’ (1 John 2:15ff).

These verses point us to the Father who has loved us. He is the source and the giver of this love. It is not from any other being or realm.

Love is given

Giving can refer to granting, supplying and flowing out. It can also indicate appointing, permitting and commissioning. The Father’s love-gift encourages us to know and to cherish the source and the substance of the love that has flowed to us from the Father and for which we have been appointed.

These verses contain an important theme: *We* are to behold, *we* are the ones who are ‘born of God’, *we* are the ones who have been ‘called the children of God’ (1 John 2:28–3:3)! Being ‘called the children of God’ relates to being born of God. Our calling means being named God’s children, and so bearing the character of the one after whom we are named. We may ask whether the Father calling us means that he has loved us so that we are named as his children, or whether he has identified us as his children to bring us into a love-communion with him and each other. While both thoughts are true, his call is one with his love, and his love for us is one with his calling of us. To love us is to call us his children, to call us his children is to love us.

John was writing about no ordinary love among humanity, however heroic and noble. He commenced his letter by mentioning the revelation of the word of eternal life – of the fellowship of the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. He wrote that ‘God is light and in him there is no darkness at all’, and that walking in this light means fellowship with the Father and the Son – and cleansing from all sin (1 John 1:1ff). The Father and the Son are the love we are to behold!

Love is known

John was focused on his readers not living in sin, and not loving the world. He wanted them to know that God is ‘faithful and just [and] will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’. It is in this context that he went to the heart of his message and stated that Jesus Christ, the righteous one, advocates for us with the Father concerning the world, sin and the devil. Jesus does this as the atoning sacrifice for our sins – and for those of everyone caught in the world system (1 John 1:7–2:2).

This action of God *is* love. It is by obeying God’s command and confessing our sins that we know that God expresses his love by cleansing us. We realise the goal of his love by walking in this light (1 John 2:5). This obedience to receiving God’s love is liberating rather than burdensome (1 John 5:1–5).

We are invited to see something far beyond anything that human endeavour or reasoning can observe, something that only the Spirit of God can reveal to us (1 John 2:20–27). In seeing the love of God, we are knowing the very being of God himself.

The remainder of this letter makes John’s understanding of God’s love and our participation in that love even clearer (cf. 1 John 3:10–23, 4:7–5:3). John commanded us to see, learn and marvel at the Father’s calling of us to be his children, and to know and be in awe of this action of God which lifts us out of the deathly darkness of this world into the life and light of the fellowship of the Father and his Son, in the Holy Spirit.

It is the action of the Father and the Son in the humanity of Jesus Christ, and especially in his death, which cleanses us from sin. It is this action which constitutes the love and call of God to those who are now his children. How incredible, awesome and amazing is God’s triune love in identifying us with and including us in God’s family. Even though the world does not recognise what this means, when Jesus is revealed,

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

This central section of the letter helps us understand the urgent message of life in the first and last verses of this epistle (1 John 1:1–4, 5:18–21).

We will be like him

1 John 3:1–10

We are God's children now

We are to delight in seeing the love the Father has for us in calling us his children, for 'this is what we are'. This current reality is again emphasised: 'Beloved, we are God's children now'. The Father *has* called us his children, and we *are now* his children! The Father's calling of us is his love – and his love for us is his calling of us (1 John 3:1–3).

There is no credit in this for us! It has taken the revelation of the Son of God in his life and death to destroy the devil's dishonest and deceitful activities (1 John 3:8). This revelation is that God is pure and total light and that life and being in God's family means communion with God and community with each other rather groping and grasping in deadly darkness. This new reality only happens because of the cleansing that comes from 'the blood of Jesus' his Son (1 John 1:5–7).

We are called on to admit our sins and not delude ourselves that this truth can be in us while we are not in fellowship with the Father and his Son. To do otherwise makes God a liar and denies that Jesus Christ is the righteous one who is 'the atoning sacrifice' for everyone sins (1 John 1:8–2:2).

To be born of God is to 'not sin' (1 John 2:1, 3:9, 5:18, cf. 2:29)! Being his children means we stop sinning about our sin! We accept the truth about ourselves. We know that God is light. We know that we only live in his light as we live in his faithfulness and forgiveness – as we live in his love.

To be born of God – and so be his children – is to know that Jesus is righteous. It is to recognise those who are born of God (1 John 2:29). It is to 'love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God' (1 John 4:7). It is to believe 'that Jesus is the Christ – the Messiah' (1 John 5:1). This belief, this faith that we are born of God, 'conquers the world' because 'the evil one does not touch' those who are born of God. This is because they are protected by the 'one who was born of God' and so 'do not sin' by being aligned with the evil one (1 John 5:4, 18).

We will see him as he is

We are God's beloved children now, but 'what we will be has not yet been revealed'. This should not surprise us, especially given our sinfulness. We are told that 'we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2). What we are now is revealed by God to us, but we do not yet fully know what we will be when we see him with 'boldness' on judgement day. The fullness of God's love will *then* be clear – love which has *now* changed all our relationships: 'as he is, so are we in this world' (1 John 4:17). *Now* we know and love the Father, the Son and the Spirit. *Now* we know fellowship with God's family. *Now* we are finished with loving

worldliness (1 John 2:15–17). *Now* we have ‘passed from death to life’ (1 John 3:14).

This connection between being God’s children and the revelation of Jesus Christ is crucial. It is seen in the negative in that the world does not know us as God’s children because it did not know the true Son of God, the word of life who is ‘with the Father’ (1 John 3:1, 1:1–3, 2:1). Conversely, as we know him, so we know who we are. It is for this purpose that we ‘have been anointed by the Holy One, and ... know all things’ (1 John 2:20).

God brings us to birth as his children by revealing ‘the eternal life that was with the Father’. This revelation was given in the humanity of Jesus in his first coming to remove sins and destroy the devil’s works (1 John 1:1–3, 3:5–8). His next coming will reveal the fullness of our being God’s children in a similar way – since we will see him in all his fullness: ‘as he is’ (1 John 3:2). Meanwhile, we are urged to ‘abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming’ (1 John 2:28).

We hope in him

To see him ‘as he is’ is to see him pure and righteous. This revelation is to impact us – we are to purify ourselves and do ‘what is right’. ‘As he is, so are we in this world’, but the full richness of what we are in this world will only be seen when we fully see him (1 John 2:28–3:3, 3:7, 4:17)!

We can be filled with hope and joy as God’s children now, as those in whom ‘God’s seed’ abides, as those who will be like Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1 John 3:3, 3:9, 1:4). This hope is not vague or ephemeral. It is hope centred in the humanity of Jesus. It is hope centred in the truth of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, and in their promise of sharing eternal life with us.

Our hope is vigorously contested by the world, by those who belong to the world and by the many antichrists that come (1 John 2:18–27). This contest is very evident in the contrast between Abel and Cain, ‘who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous’.

We are to live as those who are born of God and love our brothers and sisters while not being astonished that the world hates us (1 John 3:12ff). We are to live lives flowing in love from righteous deeds, even when others work evil. This was the story of Abel, and especially the story of Jesus. It is this love-story *into* which we are called and commanded. It is this love-story which means that we

abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us (1 John 3:23, 24).

We are to be alert to false prophets and evil spirits, knowing that the Spirit of and from God declares ‘that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ (1 John 4:1, 2). We are

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

to be confident that ‘the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world’ (1 John 4:4). We can be sure that as we love not merely in words and speech, but in truth and action, that we will know God’s personal reassurance in our hearts (1 John 3:18–20).

We will not only know God and his love for us, we will delight in doing his will – in obeying his commandments (1 John 5:3). We will walk in his light and live in his truth (1 John 2:3–11). All this will be personal and shared with our brothers and sisters. Our testimony will be clear:

God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ...

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:11–20).

In this is love

1 John 4:7–19

Whose love?

John urges us to ‘love one another, because love is from God’. Love results from being born of God and knowing God. The source of the love of which John wrote is not acknowledged outside of this community. He asserted that those who love are born of God and know God and that those who do not love are not born of God and abide in death (cf. 1 John 3:14). He was not saying that those who do not know God do not love.

The nature of this love occupied John’s message throughout the second part of his letter. He did not consider any other human activity than love as being *God’s* love. John wrote that God’s love is the source of love in us and reaches its goal when we obey God’s word – and this is not onerous (1 John 2:5, 5:2, 3). It brings us confidence that we are in fellowship with God (1 John 2:5), involves us not loving the world or worldly things (1 John 2:15), and prevents the world from knowing us (1 John 3:1).

God’s love makes us God’s children and names us as his family (1 John 3:1). It means loving those who are God’s children (1 John 3:11, 4:20, 21) and leads us to lay down our lives for each other (1 John 3:16). God’s love leads us to share what we have with others – in words and in actions (1 John 3:17, 18).

God’s love means we have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14) and prepares us for the day of judgement by removing fear of punishment (1 John 4:17, 18).

This love has been revealed because ‘God sent his only Son into the world’ (1 John 4:9). John wrote at the start of his letter of looking at and touching ‘Jesus Christ the righteous’, the ‘word of life’, the ‘eternal life who was with the Father’. He highlighted the life shared between the Father and the Son, in which the people of God were now participating. This fellowship is light without darkness and by Jesus’ death and resurrection brings forgiveness and cleansing to those who confess their sins (1 John 1:1–2:2). God’s love has not only been revealed; God’s love brings us life: ‘God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him’ (1 John 4:9).

John was emphasising that knowing, loving, living and obeying God are of one bundle. They mean we are walking in the light and abiding in God. Entry into this community comes from hearing what is proclaimed by those who have already heard what God has said in the person of Jesus Christ.

What is the essence of this love?

The answer has already been implied, but John summarised his message by declaring that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:16). What are we to understand by his claim

that ‘in this is love ...’ (1 John 4:10)? John was opening a discussion about love by first pointing out that we did not love God. What did he mean? I take it that he meant there is no active fountain of love for God within us independent of God. Prior to hearing the word of life – of love and light – we might have been like Cain who hated his brother because ‘his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous’ (1 John 3:12). John was being gentler than saying ‘in this is love, not in our hating God, but in his loving us ...’! He wrote that ‘love is from God’ and then that ‘God is love’ (John 4:9, 10, 16). For John, love is not from us, but from God. We are not love, only God is love!

Our sinfulness is not only in not loving, but in closing ourselves to God and his love for us. The essence of God’s love is in his sending his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins and for those of all humanity.

There are two essential aspects to love that John has raised:

Love is participation

Even though John did not mention love until verse 5 of chapter 2, he had already written implicitly about love.³⁵ Love is communion between persons. It is expressed through speaking and listening, in revealing and looking, and in reaching out to touch and in being touched – not simply as a principle or practice, but as the life of God within God’s-self and in the humanity of Jesus Christ. God’s love was revealed in Jesus coming in response to his Father’s initiative and is witnessed to by the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:2–13).

John saw that God’s love revealed to us something of the inner being of God – the communion of the one-God community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. No wonder John wrote what he did about the ways in which God’s love flows from those who have been forgiven and cleansed by the blood of Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 1:5–2:2, 4:10).

To be in this love is to be in God and to abide in him. It is to pass from death to life (1 John 3:14), to overcome the evil one (1 John 2:13, 14), and to conquer the world (1 John 5:5). This love comes as an ‘anointing by the Holy One’ which opens us up to the truth of God (1 John 2:21, 27).

Love as propitiation³⁶

Cain killed his brother to quieten his conscience after Abel’s offering brought Abel joy and peace and Cain’s left Cain downcast and angry (1 John 3:12ff). Cain’s offering failed to calm his conscience, but Abel knew God’s peace when offering

³⁵ Perhaps John did not mention love until this point to make his thoughts on love even clearer!

³⁶ Propitiation is used for atoning sacrifice in some translations. The word group is used infrequently in the New Testament but twice in this letter (1 John 2:2, 4:10). It links with the mercy seats in the Hebrew tabernacle and Jewish temples.

his sacrifice. Abel must have believed that God would somehow lay down his life for us (1 John 3:16; cf. Genesis 3:15).

Propitiation relates to wrath. God's propitiation acts to end a person's anger with themselves, with other people and with God by being *merciful*. Fallen anger is the result of failed love. Where there is no context for love there will be no anger. But holy love must bring holy disapproval when we act like Cain. God's 'wrath' is not some intemperate divine rage against or towards us, but God's peaceful insistence on not acting in the ways we may do when we are angry. It is God's present participation in human suffering by *kindness* and *mercy* and not a remote divine detachment or disengagement. It is this 'wrath' that we, in our sinfulness, dread. We fear it because it speaks death to our rage and judgement on our hate (cf. 1 John 2:17, 18, 4:17, 18).

Jesus, John wrote, is our 'advocate with the Father'. Jesus is not defending us before a hostile heavenly Father but working *for* us *with* the Father and the Spirit, declaring to the world and to the evil one (to whom we once belonged) that the matters of death and judgement are finished (1 John 2:1, 2, 12–14). Jesus' sacrificial death involved him experiencing humanity's hateful spite and anger. He suffered God's response to our evil as he died as the Saviour of the world not as the Father's direct action against him, but as God's act *for* us against those at enmity with God (1 John 4:14). Jesus suffered *with* us as God's loving light shone on our unholy anger while his Son purged our darkness as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 1:5–2:2, 4:10).

What results from this love?

We who had not and have not loved God, but whom God loved so much now love. We now love God and humanity because he first loved us! The emphasis is on being loved by God and now loving God and other people. God is love. God has not stopped being love, and so has not stopped loving us. Central to John's letter is the event of divine love that is in Jesus being the atoning sacrifice for our sins – and for those of the whole world.

When we love – because of God's love in us – our love is both interactive and intercessory: we lay down our lives for others, sharing ourselves with them (1 John 3:16, 17), confident of the destiny that awaits humanity in Jesus Christ (1 John 3:1–3).

Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him

Revelation 1:1–20

The revelation which God gave Jesus Christ

We all have our own mind-set concerning history and Jesus Christ. This first chapter tells us that Jesus himself received a revelation from his Father of what was to happen. He was given this revelation ‘to show his servants what must soon take place’. John, having received this revelation from an angel, ‘testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw’ (Revelation 1:1, 2). Having written this testimony down as the angel instructed him to do, John then declared that those who read aloud the prophecy, and those who hear and keep it, will be blessed.

John’s testimony to the testimony of Jesus Christ to the word of God is only known by revelation. We may have a lot of facts related to this revelation, and think we are wise in our understanding, but it will not *be* this revelation unless it is disclosed in the way described by those who *received* the revelation.

As the content of the book relates to ‘what must soon take place’, a careful and prayerful reading is necessary. The letters to the seven churches precede the visions of heaven and the opening of the seals. The blowing of the trumpets and the pouring out of the bowls of God’s wrath are followed by the fall of Babylon and the demise of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The marriage of the bride and the Lamb, and the coming into full view of the new Jerusalem bring the revelation to its climax.

It is easy to get so involved in trying to comprehend these accounts that we miss what is at the heart of this first chapter. The revelation that came to John was not simply, and certainly not firstly, *what* God was, is and will be doing, but *who* Jesus Christ is and so what *he* is doing in harmony and with the ‘seven spirits who are before [God’s] throne’ (Revelation 1:4, cf. 3:1, 4:5, 5:6).

Psalm 2 is often quoted or referred to in the book of Revelation. That psalm describes God’s response to angry, defiant nations attempting to overthrow God’s sovereignty. The kings and wise people are warned that blessings come by taking refuge in God’s anointed son and terrible death overtakes those continually and finally defiant of his authority (Psalm 2:4–9).

The flow of God’s speech in this psalm is clear: After declaring that his king reigns on his holy hill, God reveals his own and his king’s identity: ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’ (Psalm 2:7). This king is *then* told to ask that he receives his inheritance as this son.

John first describes Jesus Christ as ‘the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’ (Revelation 1:5). Having spoken of *who* he sees, he then praises God for *what* God has done in loving and liberating us ‘from

our sins by his blood' and making us to be a community where God reigns and which serves Jesus' God and Father, to whom 'be glory and dominion forever and ever' (Revelation 1:5, 6).

This sequence is then repeated for all humanity – with the arrival of the *person* of Jesus Christ relating primarily to his crucifixion:

Look! 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 (Revelation 1:7).

The introduction is completed with God's self-declaration that he is the Alpha and the Omega, whom John called 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' (Revelation 1:8).

While receiving this revelation was good news for the seven churches, it meant death by crucifixion for Jesus.³⁷ This good news provided a divine perspective for those who shared with John 'in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance' (Revelation 1:9). For those who receive God's word and the testimony of Jesus concerning who God is and what God has done, is doing and will be doing, *wisdom* about eternal mysteries was given to them to guide them in their troubled lives.

Seeing the voice

John turned to see the loud voice that spoke behind him. This description personalises the voice as being and speaking the word of God. Moses had reminded the Israelites that at Sinai the LORD spoke to them out of a fire and that they heard 'the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice'. Receiving God's commandments was no small event. They were to be careful and alert and to ensure that they remembered what happened and shared in their families. They were not to engage in idolatry because the LORD had removed them from the 'iron-smelter' of Egypt to be God's own people (Deuteronomy 4:9–20).

John's description of Jesus as 'one like a Son of Man' takes us to a new dimension altogether, with even more serious consequences than Israel faced at Sinai (cf. Hebrews 10–12, John 1). The priest-king is robed in glory, sees with complete vision, stands with eternal certainty and speaks with ever-living, life-giving authority and power. His holy glory and glorious holiness come with the full force of his own personal presence and potency. He has conquered death through his

³⁷ The mocking derision, wrath and fury assigned to God in Psalm 2 in the context of his enthroning his son-king on Zion and granting him the nations as his inheritance and 'the ends of the earth' as his possession is best interpreted in Revelation in terms of the brutal crucifixion of the Lamb by religious and political tyrants. God breaks nations with the iron-rod of non-violent grace, mercy and peace. He dashes them 'in pieces like a potter's vessel' by being and behaving as the opposite of their demeaning, deceitful, devious and defiant evil spirituality.

own death; death is now under his death-defeating dominion. He is alive forever and ever and is walking among the churches and ruling history on *this* basis!

No wonder there will be such wailing when every eye sees him! His priestly reign and his royal priesthood are consistent with and one with his death on the cross. Everything else is exposed as false and collapses with Babylon, the harlot, and the Satanic counterfeit, counterpart 'trinity'.

Those in the seven churches – and all God's people – are to come out of the slavery of spiritual Egypt, out of the captivity of spiritual Babylon, out of the idolatry of religious Israel and into the liberating presence of the Shepherd-Lamb who is the true Lion of the tribe of Judah, the true Davidic king. It is for God's people to accept the discipline of the priest-king walking among the candlesticks and so receive his magnificent promises. It is for the household of God to obey what the Spirit says to the churches. It is for them to proclaim him to each other and to all the nations, and to live under him as those whom he loves *now*, as those whom he has 'freed from our sins by his blood', and as those who have been made 'to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever' (Revelation 1:5, 6).

Revealing God's priestly-kingdom-family

Reading this book with this theme in mind, we too may receive the

revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; [and which] he made ... known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw (Revelation 1:1, 2).

We would learn more of one walking among the churches who does not lord it over them from a distance but leads them by being with them (Revelation 2, 3). We would learn that knowing Jesus as the Father's Son brings fresh eyes to seeing the celestial worship of God on his throne (Revelation 4). We would see that the Lamb who unlocks the scroll (Revelation 5) is one with the Lord God Almighty and is the 'Lamb at the centre of the throne' who shepherds those who have come out of the great tribulation 'to springs of the water of life' where God wipes away their tears (Revelation 7:17).

We would learn more of Jesus as God's Messiah-King who rules forever over this world's kingdoms and whose worship in God's celestial temple brings blessings to God's people and finality to those destroying God's creation (Revelation 11). We would read of Jesus overthrowing the dragon who was filled with great hate for him and his God and who constantly attacked God's people with evil accusations (Revelation 12).

We would see more clearly the way Jesus is with the multitude who have 'his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads' and who sing a new and fresh

song before God's throne and those nearby (Revelation 14, cf. 4:1ff). We would hear the 'call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus' and the heavenly voice wanting blessings documented for those who were about to 'die in the Lord'. We would know the Spirit's affirmation that these martyrs would rest from their toils confident that their actions would be remembered.

This assurance was necessary because 'there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand' (Revelation 14:12–14)!

We would sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb in Revelation chapter 15 about God's great and amazing achievements in acting with justice and truth as ruler of the world's nations:

Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.

We would hear 'the loud voice' of a very large heavenly community declaring the consummation of the victory of God, knowing that what follows is the revelation of the marriage of the bride and the Lamb, the Faithful and True rider on the white horse called The Word of God whom the armies of heaven follow as he effects the victory described in Psalm 2 (Revelation 19).

We would see the final judgement with those made alive in the first resurrection contrasted with those who, having rejected this free gift of life, prefer the second death. We would then see the renewed heavens and earth replace the former ones as the holy city comes *down* to earth out of heaven *from God*, prepared 'as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2).

The God who had been with his people in their sufferings and who, in his Son, had defeated death and dealt with our sins by being with us and among us, is now forever with God's people in God's renewed creation. This means that no temple or sunlight is needed. Those whose names are in the Lamb's book of life eat of the twelve kinds of fruit produced by the tree of life, growing by the river that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb. The leaves of this tree heal the nations! The invitation – the command – of the Spirit and the bride promise living water as a gift. The doom of defiance is as sure as the final coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ. His arrival will open further rivers of grace that consummate all things according to the revelation that his Father gave him – of *who* he is and of *what* he is to do!

As the book unfolds, these revelations and many more outline the glory of the unbroken triune unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as God achieves the complete glorification and perfection of the seven confused, tormented and struggling churches described in chapters 2 and 3. The final revelation of God is

Meditations on Resilience and Renewal

not of God *apart* from humanity and creation, but of God *with* God's people in God's renewed creation – with God's eyes on them directing their eyes to God's triune self as God is with them, and to their final destiny in and with the Father, Son and Spirit forever in the new heavens and the new earth!³⁸

³⁸ Cf. Anne R. Cousin, 'The Sands of Time Are Sinking,' <http://cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/a/sandtime.htm>.

The two witnesses and the seventh trumpet

Revelation 11:1–19

Measuring the temple, the altar, and the worshippers

Measuring the temple may seem strange, but it would have reminded the early churches of Ezekiel's vision of the new temple. Ezekiel saw a man with bronze-like radiance holding a 'a linen cord and a measuring reed' while standing in the temple gateway. This man told Ezekiel to be discerning and attentive because of what he was about to be shown and would then need to announce (Ezekiel 40:3, 4).

Ezekiel saw the 'the glory of the God of Israel ... coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory'. He heard someone from the temple tell him to describe God's sanctuary in detail in order to provoke them to be ashamed of their evildoings (Ezekiel 43:2, 10–12).

The temple, the altar and details concerning the worship were described to Ezekiel. He was, for example, shown 'water flowing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east'. The new boundaries of the land and the city of God were outlined. Ezekiel's prophecy ends by announcing a new name for the city: 'The LORD is There' (Ezekiel 47:1ff, 48:35).

Zechariah prophesied of a 'measuring line' being 'stretched over Jerusalem' as part of God's compassion for Jerusalem (Zechariah 1:16). Measuring was not always evidence of blessing (2 Kings 21:13–15).

The writing on the wall at King Belshazzar's feast also proved ominous (Daniel 5:24–27), while David believed that we should be mindful of the length of our lives and focus on being wise in God's sight (Psalm 90:12).

When the new Jerusalem was revealed to John, the angel who spoke with him 'had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls' (Revelation 21:15). Everyone in the city was accounted for, fruit would come each month, nothing unclean would enter the city, and nations would bring their glory in through the ever-open gates.

Two witnesses: prophecy, death and resurrection

These two witnesses, like John, had no doubt 'measured the temple', and had themselves been measured when measuring. They stood 'before the Lord of all the earth' (Revelation 11:3). As with Ezekiel, they witnessed to what they saw in the temple. They were more than observers; they were true worshippers like the Old Testament prophets. To see the glory of God come to the temple, to see the altar, and to see the river flowing from near the altar must have been as confronting to Ezekiel as when Isaiah 'saw the Lord sitting on a throne' (Isaiah 6:1–13; cf. John 12:36b–43).

The power of the witnesses' testimony is evident, and the consequences for them fatal (Revelation 11:5, 6). The reference to the two witnesses as 'the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth' links with the high-priestly and royal visions in Zechariah 3 and 4, and with the faithful two-sevenths of the church. It is also a reminder that two witnesses were required in Israel before any criminal sentence should be enforced (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15; cf. Hebrews 10:28).

The ministry of these two witnesses was measured as three and a half years, and the time of their being dead was three and a half days (Revelation 11:3, 11). As Jesus indicated, the ministries of the king and those in his Father's kingdom are of one piece. They are all in the Father's care and with the Holy Spirit's leading (cf. Matthew 6:25–34, 10:16–33). This vision therefore presents the normal ministry of God's people: it details their witness, suffering and glorification. The passing of the second woe on rebellious humanity also revealed a rich rewarding of God's servants (Revelation 11:14–19).

The seventh trumpet

The witness of these two prophetic servants was followed by the sound of the seventh angel's trumpet, which was accompanied by

loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

Revelation 11:16–18 is a commentary on the testimony previously given. The impact of the witnesses' prophecy and the results that follow are not their own work. God's powerful reign opposes 'those who destroy the earth'.

The witnesses suffered and died as their king-Jesus suffered and died, they served as servant-Jesus gave himself and they were raised as their Lord and Messiah Jesus was raised. Being one with him – by his anointing and in his Spirit – meant that as surely as these witnesses died to the world (described here as Sodom and Egypt), the world died to them (described here in their going to 'heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them') (Revelation 11:8). This account is not only of the impact of the prophetic witness on the world, but of God's transforming power at work in and through his people.

Paul wrote on these lines to the Galatian church wanting to boast only about

the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!

Paul wanted them to know peace and mercy and to be free from the kinds of suffering to which his body testified (Galatians 6:14–17).

This world's kingdoms come forever under Messiah's lordship. The finality of what happens to defiant nations and faithful saints is determined by Messiah's 'forever and ever' reign (Revelation 11:15–17).

The open temple and visible covenant-ark

The twenty-four elders end their doxology by declaring the downfall of those 'who destroy the earth' (Revelation 11:18), implying the renewal of creation (Revelation 19–22).

We are not to be dazzled or bewildered by the 'flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail' that accompany God's judgements (Revelation 11:19). Our focus is to be on the worship of those in the temple whom, along with the temple itself and the altar, John was told to measure. This worship meant the end of the 'trampling over the holy city' that equated with the raging of the nations (cf. Psalm 2). No wonder John was not to bother measuring the outer court at that time (Revelation 11:1–3)!

True worship focuses on the ark of the covenant, on God's relationship with creation, and with his people (Revelation 21:1ff). History, as described in the book of Revelation, is to be understood as the expression of God's own triune communion embracing and redeeming humanity into his family as the bride of his Son. It is into this worship that the two witnesses were taken – into the worship of the celestial creatures and the twenty-four elders, into the worship of God that Christ himself authors and directs. We are to read this book and join in this worship until 'the number' of those in this prophetic testimony is 'complete' (Revelation 6:9–11).

A call for endurance and faith

Revelation 12:18–13:18

The book of Revelation contains mysteries: Revelation 1:20 mentions the ‘mystery of the seven stars’, Revelation 10:7 speaks of the fulfilment of the ‘mystery of God’, while Revelation 17:5–7 calls Babylon’s harlotry a mystery. There are also four references to wisdom: Revelation 5:12 and 7:12 refer to God’s wisdom while 13:18 and 17:9 are calls for the reader to have wisdom.

One interpretive principle regarding apocalyptic language is that it uses codes and encryptions to avoid unwelcome scrutiny when read in hostile environments. The dramatic pictures of the foul trinity of the dragon and two beasts in Revelation 13 are only broken up by verses 8b to 10 and the call for wisdom in verse 18a. Given that evil acts to set up counterparts and counterfeits of everything God does, the portrayals of the foul trinity in Revelation would have informed and encouraged the readers in the seven churches about who God is and the way the Lamb of God achieves victory. When reversed, everything evil does reveals something of who God is and what God is doing. The seals, trumpets and bowls all convey images representing the way evil responds to the revelations of heaven described throughout the book. This pattern is similar to the one used in the signs in John’s Gospel, where opposition to Jesus increases from the nuances about Jesus concerning the best wine being served last to the active opposition of Caiaphas and his colleagues that leads to Jesus – the lamb of God – being crucified.

The dragon and the two beasts

In the previous twelve chapters, God has revealed himself, churches have been disciplined, seven seals have been opened, seven trumpets blown, and some scenes of God’s redeemed people have been described. Like layers peeled off an onion, we now see more of the heart of evil – and will later see its expression in the harlot city of Babylon the Great.

God’s judgements unmask evil and expose its perverse and rotten core both at the cross and in this apocalyptic history (cf. Hebrews 2:14). Evil is personalised and animalised in this account. It is no mere force; yet calling it personal may dignify it too much! The dragon and the two beasts are linked with the devil and Satan (Revelation 2:10, 12:9, 12, 20:2, 10), the false prophet (Revelation 16:13, 19:20, 20:10), and idolatrous images and false worship (Revelation 13:11ff, 14:9ff, 15:2, 16:2, 19:20, 20:4).

The first beast

Revelation 12:18–13:2 describes ‘a beast rising out of the sea’ after ‘the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore’. A beast was mentioned in Revelation 11:7, where we were told that it came out of ‘the bottomless pit’. The ‘sea’ is the nations (cf. Revelation 17:15) and this beast is the dragon’s servant. In the picture

of the beast, horns are crowned, while in the description of the dragon, heads are crowned (Revelation 12:2; cf. Daniel 7:1ff).

In Revelation 13:3–4, the dragon seeks worshippers, and through the action of the beast sets up a counterfeit, counterpart church. Worship was given because ‘One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast’ (cf. Revelation 13:12). There can be no true resurrection since evil beasts have no authentic life (cf. Hebrews 1:3, 9:26–28)! Worship was also given because of the beast’s strength, and not for its worth (cf. the worship accorded to God and the Lamb in Revelation 4 and 5).

Revelation 13:5 contrasts Jesus as the word of God (Revelation 1:2, 9) with the beast’s blasphemy. Blasphemy is not simply speaking against God, but falsely speaking *as* God and pretending to have God’s authority. Blasphemy relates, therefore, to self-deification.

The Beast always wins; death always wins (cf. Revelation 9:7–12, 12:7; Jude 1:9), but Jesus Christ took hold of the keys of death and Hades and defeats the beastliness that always wins (Revelation 1:18; cf. Luke 22:53; Romans 8:36–39). Hence the patient endurance of going into captivity – and not retaliating.

Revelation 13:6–7 develops this theme. The beast was given authority ‘to make war with the saints and to overcome them’ (cf. Revelation 11:7; 1 John 5:19). Those who dwell in heaven include God’s people. They are God’s tabernacle, God’s temple, since God dwells within them and among them. To persecute them is to persecute God. To blaspheme God’s name is to deny God’s holiness (cf. Matthew 6:9). The devil, Jesus said, is a liar and the father of lies who has no truth in him (John 8:44). He can only gain position by denying the truth about God, which blasphemy does.

The second beast

Revelation 13:11–18 introduces another beast. This one comes up out of the earth and is called the ‘false prophet’ (Revelation 16:13, 19:10, 20:10). This beast habitually performs great signs, even ‘causing fire to come down out of heaven’ in imitation of Elijah’s ministry on Mt. Carmel. The prophecies and signs are powerfully deceptive and draw everyone to the idolatrous worship of the beast and the dragon. This perverse adoration generates beastly commerce and contrasts Babylon the Great with the new Jerusalem into which kings bring glory through open gates, drink living water and eat healing life-giving fruit as they serve God.

The mark of the beast is necessary for commerce in Babylon; the name of the Lamb is essential for commerce in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 22:4). The mark and the number act as shorthand of this name. To receive a mark is to worship the one who gives it (cf. the ‘seal of God’ in Revelation 9:4).

The Lamb's book of life

Revelation 13:8–10 describes the authority of the beast as being so complete that 'all who dwell on the earth' worship him, but then excludes those whose names were 'written in the book of life of the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world'. While this exclusion does not eliminate their suffering, it does provide a strategy for dealing with it.

Non-violence, Lamb-like suffering is the way to victory, and is the victory of God. The advice that 'anyone who has an ear' should listen revisits the instructions given to the seven churches to 'listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (Revelation 13:9, cf. 2:7, ... 3:22).

There is victory in being defeated, taken captive, and killed! The cruciform shape of the 'revelation of Jesus Christ' informs the readers and listeners about the Shepherd-Lamb, and about their destiny (Revelation 1:1, 7:9-17).

The call for wisdom in verse 18 takes readers and listeners back to John being told to measure the temple, altar and worshippers. Calculating and measuring are commands to decrypt and discover the Lamb, the 'one seated on the throne', the 'seven spirits of God', and the celestial worship described throughout the book (cf. Revelation 4:1ff).

Evil is reversed by God into a renewed heavens and earth. Evil can only falsify good, it can't create or redeem anything, that is God's prerogative!

The first beast falsified incarnation, power, wisdom and worship. This beast falsified crucifixion and resurrection and portrayed itself using a blasphemous narrative. The second beast prophesied as a false lamb, performing signs and wonders, promising life but bringing death, promoting prosperity but providing idolatry and coercion. The beasts implement the dragon's doomed agenda. Those listening in the Spirit of Jesus to the testimony of Jesus will have re-heard the Gospel through this often negative-apocalyptic. They will have been reminded of wonderful themes from the Gospel and Letters of John concerning the Word of Life, who as the Lamb of God, filled with the Spirit of God, came to his own home and people to show them, and lead them in the way, truth, and life of their heavenly Father.

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

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Learning to Love Wisdom

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Joys and Sorrows

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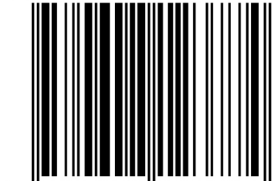
In what ways are the fruit of the Spirit a revelation of who God is and the ways God acts in grace and mercy in, with, and through humanity to fulfil God's creative and creational purposes?

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