



# In Triune Community

*Conversations along the way*

Don Priest



**In Triune Community**

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## THE TRINITY

O blessed glorious Trinity,  
Bones to philosophy, but milk to faith,  
Which, as wise serpents, diversely  
Most slipperness, yet most entanglings hath,  
As you distinguish'd, undistinct,  
By power, love, knowledge be,  
Give me a such self different instinct,  
Of these let all me elemented be,  
Of power, to love, to know you unnumbered three.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From John Donne, 'A Litany' <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/litany.php>, 'The Trinity'.

## Introduction

*In Triune Community* focuses on God's being, revealed to us in Jesus Christ as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and highlights the shared life of the people of God in the context of God's presence with us and his purposes for us. While this approach to Scripture has obvious strengths, one of its dangers is that it may minimise complex and painful human crises by seeing them through a lens of missional pragmatism and/or romantic piety. Suffering, death and illness are ever-present realities evoking forms of aspiration, faith and hope, each expressed for the common good. Appreciating unity and diversity in communities where people are treated with dignity and decency best assists us comfort each other when we are distressed and dismayed. Cultures and cultuses in different times and places are shaped by interpersonal participation, generational and peer relationships, and the exercise of authority and power. Awareness and understanding of divine presence and purpose can helpfully inform these realities. *In Triune Community* uses a mostly theocentric and biblical lens to take some small steps in considering these thoughts.

Each of these studies was originally presented as a session for an unassessed, non-accredited seasonal 'school' operating under an overall main theme. Topics were provided to those giving the studies. The structure of these notes was affected by a didactic rather than a dialogical teaching context. A hierarchical focus on teaching and ministry is different from one centred on creative renewal and refreshment through group learning and mutual community. The former is more catechetical than collaborative, with exclusion and privilege readily dominating inclusion and participation.

My notes are not footnoted academic papers and do not include any significant homiletical material. Placing the studies in the categories used in this book provides a range of perspectives on related topics, and so inevitably leads to repetition of ideas and under-emphasis of helpful aspects. It also means the original contexts are not stated. This arrangement of studies is not therefore the result of a prior ordered or strategic survey but comes from a living journey engaging in allocated opportunities. I have aimed to share my thought patterns without significantly changing my original designs.

I have grouped my studies in seven sections covering the three eras of the Christian Bible – Old Testament or Hebrew Bible describing Israel's history, Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and other New Testament books covering the emerging Christian communities. One helpful lens for considering these groupings relates to a way organisational leadership can consider strategic priorities and risk reduction and so implement corporate vision. Flourishing faith communities will recognise and reduce group-thinking, core rigidities and role-lock. They will intentionally engage in educational, pastoral, missional and devotional worship-oriented activities.

## In Triune Community

*Israel – God's people* reflects on Exodus, kingdom and exile narratives with a focus on significant leaders and their framing of the nation's destiny, a future Messiah and temple worship. *The life of Jesus* primarily looks at Jesus' relations with the Father and the Spirit, and his identity and ministry. *The death and resurrection of Jesus* considers New Testament understandings of what happened on the cross and the significance of Jesus' resurrection.

*God's presence with his people* develops these themes in terms of Christ's current ministry and our identity and worship as God's people. *Living in God's holiness and love* looks at some aspects of our daily journeys, while *With God in his world* and *Culture and vocation* explore various ways in which we reach out beyond our own boundaries to interact and dialogue with the world around us.

Calling this book *In Triune Community* focuses attention on triune communion as well as triune community – on God's person and presence as well as on God's promises and purposes. The following passages are a small selection that emphasise these themes:

When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus whether he was the Messiah, Jesus spoke of the healings and deliverances that were happening. ... He said his yoke was easy and his burden was light, and that his life of triune communion with the Father in the Spirit was being shown to them. The 'Father, the Lord of heaven and earth' promised rest for those who come to his Son, even the sabbath rest missed out on by Israel in the wilderness. Jesus calls us as the true man of faith, hope and love. He urges us to live in his faith, hope and love (Matthew 11; Hebrews 3, 4).<sup>2</sup>

Like Peter, we must learn that we, too, need his death and resurrection, and that all else comes in this divine gift – not apart from it, and certainly not beyond it. We do well to answer Jesus' earlier question to his disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:15). Who is Jesus? Who is his Father? Who is the Holy Spirit? What are they doing in Jesus' incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming? What is their gospel? What is the nature of their church, their community, and what is its mission? And do we know and understand this gospel, this church, this mission only as they are consistent with the God whom we know through Jesus Christ as Lord?<sup>3</sup>

The battle for the human soul is God's insistence on his own integrity across creation and throughout history. His holiness and love come face to face with all humanity in Jesus 'who loved me and gave himself for me'

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<sup>2</sup> Don Priest, *In Triune Community* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2019), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 70.

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(Galatians 2:20). Jesus wins the battle and brings us into his eternal communion with the Father in the Spirit. The Eternal Community brings us into their Eternal Communion. They engage us in their battle not only for us, but for everyone (Revelation 7:13–17). Such strong, strong love!<sup>4</sup>

My interests have focused on the ways biblical authors engaged in proto-Trinitarian thinking, on appreciating the centrality of incarnational considerations in the New Testament, and on developing understandings of atonement, restoration, humanity and creation. In originally preparing these resources, I read the Scriptures as an educator working in government area and secondary schools, while reflecting on the economic, social and spiritual realities of those with whom I experienced community.

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

*Spirit of Christ the Lord –  
Father's holy Dove –  
You heal us from evil's pain  
And free us to live in love.*

From the dawn of history,  
Through the cross of Calvary,  
You sent your Spirit forth  
Over all the earth  
To fill our hearts with peace and joy.<sup>5</sup>

Don Priest  
July 2019

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>5</sup> *New Creation Hymn Book*, (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>, 2010), 287.

# Israel – God's people

## God's mercy revealed in Israel's covenant history

### Introduction

A study of the mercy of God revealed in the history of Israel through God's covenants with them includes identifying that Israel was called to be a priestly nation to other nations (Exodus 19:5, 6). We can therefore best understand God's mercy to *any* nation by understanding God's mercy to Israel.

Further, what was and is true for Israel is true personally for us in various ways. In this story we find something of our story, our history. We learn here things that we, with our own personal and social concerns, may need to learn.

We can see that God's mercies relate primarily to his purpose and plan for redeeming his people and bringing his creation to renewal and fullness. This means that our want for immediate personal or national comfort and prosperity must not be confused with God's mercy. His mercy is his action to ensure that we are freed from our bondage and slavery to sin and released into obedience to his Word, to his Son. This obedience is the gift of his Spirit to us, and so is our adoption into his family by faith and in his grace.

### From Abraham to Moses

Stephen began his reply to the Jewish Council by declaring that the 'God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham' (Acts 7:1ff; cf. Hebrews 11). According to Exodus 34:6, 7, God's glory relates to God being

merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.

Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, prophesied in the fullness of the Holy Spirit that God 'has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them'. He saw that God 'has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham'. This covenant mercy means being delivered from our enemies to 'serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days' (Luke 1:67–79).

The history of the revelation of God's mercy to Israel has a clear foundation in the story of Abraham. Not only did God's covenant with him mean mercy and grace to Abraham in bringing him out of Ur, in settling him in the promised land, in protecting him and Sarah from deceiving Abimelech, and in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, but God indicated that great mercy would be shown to Abraham's descendants (Genesis 15:13–16).

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God's covenant with Abraham means his descendants were to be God's righteous people, living in his promised land and declaring God to the other nations. Through their daily vocations, in their marriages and with their families, their lives in the homeland that God gave them would witness to God's love for them. The centrality of worship in this is clear, and even though the sabbath is not mentioned here, its importance is emphasised in the creation story and later in the Mosaic covenant.

The story of Jacob tells us more about God's mercy. On returning from Laban, Jacob was primarily concerned about his brother Esau. When alone at Peniel, Jacob learned that he could re-enter the promised land only by God's mercy (Genesis 32)! God's preservation of his people through Joseph in Egypt is insisted on by Joseph when his brothers feared retribution after Jacob's death:

'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 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. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones'. In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Genesis 50:19–21)

## From Moses to David

Just as God not only showed mercy to Abraham, but spoke of his future mercy in the Exodus, God also did with Moses. Moses, for example, was protected after killing the Egyptian taskmaster, and God's hand was upon him in Midian and before Pharaoh. Even God's prevention of Moses entering the promised land was merciful. The alternative of not dealing with Moses' and the people's rebellious spirits was too terrible to contemplate.

In the wilderness, the Israelites were given

the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever (Romans 9:4, 5).

This included the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, 'the throne of grace' where they could 'receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:16). The mercy seat identified the true essence and source of God's initiatives in being merciful (cf. Luke 18:10–14). Although this worship was for all nations (as in Exodus 19:5, 6), the Israelite leaders, apart from Joshua and Caleb, feared the Canaanites more than the God who delivered them from Egypt (Numbers 13, 14; cf. Exodus 15).

Prior to Israel entering the promised land, Moses warned them that judgements would come from forsaking God's covenant. These judgements were linked with God's mercies (Deuteronomy 4:21–31). God's gift of Samuel in answer to

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Hannah's longing for a child revealed his mercy to his 'faithful ones' (1 Samuel 1, 2; cf. the stories of Rahab and Ruth and Naomi). Ezra, calling the people to repentance after the exile, described Israel's history from Abraham through the Exodus in terms of God's mercy (Nehemiah 9:9ff).

### **From David to the exile**

David, chosen by God as shepherd-king of his people, knew that his kingship had been given to him in God's 'goodness and mercy' (cf. Psalm 23). David cried out many times to God for mercy and longed for God's steadfast love and faithfulness. These divine gifts were the foundations of God's covenant with David and God's promises to his Messiah-Son-King (Psalms 2, 89 and 110; 2 Samuel 7). David was no moral hero and needed God's mercy because of his adultery with Bathsheba, his violence to Uriah, his failure to care for Tamar and discipline Amon, and his transgressions against other people (2 Samuel 11ff; Psalm 51).

God spoke through Solomon not only of his current mercies to his people, but of his future mercies when they would rebel and so be under God's wrath (cf. 2 Chronicles 7). The glories of the Davidic kingdom, intended as a witness to the nations, faded as the people gave themselves over to the evil, idolatrous practices of other nations. God's mercies to former generations became judgements to later generations (cf. Nehemiah 9:30, 31).

Hezekiah and Isaiah were exceptions who sought the mercies of God in the face of his coming judgements and the nation's exile. Sennacherib's defeat was an answer to their repentance and prayers. The king had warned the people not to be stubborn, but to 'serve the LORD your God, so that his fierce anger may turn away from you. ... For the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him' (2 Chronicles 30:8, 9).

### **Before and beyond the exile – Isaiah and Jeremiah**

Just as God showed mercy to Abraham and promised mercy to Moses' generation, so the prophets prior to the exile promised a new covenant, rich with mercy, after the exile. This covenant meant not only God's restoration of Israel, but a new Israel under a new covenant with a new Davidic Messiah-Son-King under whom all God's promises would be fulfilled (cf. Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi). It is this great mercy and grace of which Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, and Anna and Simeon were aware (Luke 1 and 2; Matthew 1 and 2).

Between Isaiah 53, which refers to the sufferings of God's servant, and Isaiah 55, which speaks of the abundance that comes from these sufferings, Isaiah described God's everlasting love and compassion. This 'covenant of peace' has its origins in God and not in any human activity. It fulfils God's redeeming purposes (Isaiah 54:1–10). The result of God's covenant compassion is clear:

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O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you (Isaiah 54:11–14).

This contrast between the desolation of judgement and the prosperity of compassion is the substance of Jeremiah's lamentations (e.g. Lamentations 3). Elsewhere Jeremiah prophesied of a new covenant which brings joyful radiance to God's people on their return from exile. They would learn that God loved them with an everlasting love, and they would declare God's word 'in the coastlands far away; [saying], "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock"' (Jeremiah 31:10). This new covenant was to break the cycle of blame and guilt (Jeremiah 31:27–30). The certainty of God's purposes – including his forgiveness of their iniquity – was to be written on their hearts and learned deep within them (Jeremiah 31:31–37).

### **Before and beyond the exile – Habakkuk, Hosea and Ezekiel**

Like Jeremiah, Habakkuk faced an overwhelming tide of God's judgements. The events he saw ahead of him were even more terrible as they would come through an evil empire and follow God's mercies to former generations. The prophet was assured by God that proud people would fail and that righteous ones would live by faith. Habakkuk's response was to worship: 'The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!'. His prayer was that God would fulfil his merciful intention. He trusted God even though he might never see the results of his mercies: 'A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk ... "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 2:4, 20, 3:1, 2 and note verses 17–19).

Isaiah prophesied comfort to Israel. God urged him to 'speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins' (Isaiah 40:1, 2). Hosea similarly wrote of God's fierce anger and tender compassion. Israel, loved by God as his child, had come under God's judgements. Yet the time would come when they would return to their homes (Hosea 11:8–11).

This parallels Ezekiel's shocking picture of Israel as God's faithless, adulterous bride and his wonderful description of God's everlasting covenant with them (Ezekiel 16:1–63).

### **Before and beyond the exile – Daniel and Zephaniah**

Daniel, realising that Jeremiah's prophecy concerning Israel's 70 years in exile was about to be completed, cried out to God to fulfil his covenant promises:

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, ... Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us ... To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets (Daniel 9:4–10).

Daniel indicated that God's judgements are always according to his promises. His confidence was that God would take his people back to Jerusalem as surely as he had brought them out of Egypt (Daniel 9:18–19). God's response was dramatic and substantial (Daniel 9:20ff)!

The history of the revelation of God's covenant mercies to Israel would not be complete without recognising God's great joy in being merciful (cf. Luke 15). Zephaniah's description of this delight is as unequivocal as the judgements that precede it. Zephaniah described the misery arising in the daily arrival of God's judgements (Zephaniah 3:1–5). But Zephaniah also wrote of God's great joy in being merciful through the judgements (Zephaniah 3:16–18).

### **Conclusion**

Paul identified what we can learn from God's mercies to all humanity:

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:32–36).

## The word of the prophet

### The call

The stories of Samuel and Jeremiah are reminders that God's call comes first to individual persons (1 Samuel 3; Jeremiah 1:4–13).

The word of the prophet is primarily the word of God breathed from God in and by the Spirit of God. It is the mind and heart of God given to men and women. This prophetic word brings the whole person to God and God to the whole person. No-one can truly hear that word unless captured by it. False prophets conjure up words from their own imaginations, or from demons (See 1 Kings 13 on two prophets and Jeremiah 23:9–32 on false prophets).

### The conscience

True prophets or *seers* see deepest to the heart. Jeremiah saw a boiling pot. He saw the inevitability and indispensability of judgement, rather than a sequence of events. Valid prophetic words first describe the outworking of divine-human relationships in the light of the certainty of the divine *telos* (Jeremiah 2:1–3, 11–13, 26–28, 31, 32, 5:12, 13, 10:1–8).

They therefore look towards the cross (cf. Lamentations 1:1, 2, 12). Jeremiah saw salvation as restorative judgement. He saw the doom of the paganism the people of God had encultured in Israel and Judea. Many of those who would not and did not go to exile fled to Egypt or were slain at home. In refusing Jeremiah's word of coming destruction, the people could not hear his message of underlying hope (Jeremiah 29:1–14). Jeremiah so identified with his people that he apparently went to Egypt with some of them, still prophesying (Jeremiah 17:5–18, 43:1–13; see also 1 Samuel 16:11, 14, 22, 23, 35 about Saul; 2 Kings 8 about Hazael; and 2 Kings 9 about Jehu).

### The crown

'That which goes deepest to the conscience goes widest to the world'.<sup>6</sup> The *telos* is the result of no light surgery on the human condition (Jeremiah 6:10–21). There is no healing as if wounds were mere scratches. There is no *parousia* without Pentecost, and no Pentecost without the cross (cf. Lamentations 3:1–3, 19–33). The human tragedy is not ameliorated or resolved by an incarnation without an atonement.

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<sup>6</sup> Original source unknown; attributed to P. T. Forsyth: Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1987), 202. See 'Geoffrey Bingham,' <https://geoffreybingham.com>, 'New Creation Publications Inc. Archive,' New Creation Publications Inc., <https://geoffreybingham.com/2019/03/12/download-the-new-creation-archive/>. Cf. P. T. Forsyth, *Work of Christ, The* (London, UK: Independent Press, 1938); *Cruciality of the Cross, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1984). See also Jaques Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972).

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The rock was struck, water flowed, bread was given, and promised land was inherited (cf. Ephesians 1:11). Jeremiah was overwhelmed to see suffering but believed that the hopelessness of suffering was not without hopeful salvation. He knew, in the mystery of God's steadfast love and redeeming holiness, that God would bring into reality a relationship between God and his people that could not come about any other way (Jeremiah 8:18–9:1, 31–37).

The book of Revelation, along with other passages (such as 1 and 2 Peter) indicates that the testimony or witness of Jesus is the spirit – essence or Spirit – of prophecy (Revelation 19:10). It is for us as it was for John on Patmos (Revelation 1:1–3). There is no authentic word outside the message of this Lamb (Revelation 22:18, 19). Moses' response to Joshua in Numbers 12:26–30 conveys a similar message. Joel recorded God promising an outpouring of God's Spirit on all humanity rather than final doom and despair (Joel 3:23–31). Peter at Pentecost saw the action of God involving Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as being reconciling, renewing and restorative. Peter saw this action building up throughout Israel's history towards the incarnation and the cross, and then flowing from the cross through Pentecost to the ends of the earth, bringing the full renewal of God's creation (Acts 2:1ff).

## The Spirit and mature humanity – Israel’s story

### The Spirit and Israel’s story

Israel’s story is told in several stages in the Old Testament: from creation to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David, from David to the exile, and then from their return from exile to the anticipated coming of a Messiah and the corresponding work of the Spirit.

It is God’s spirit who ‘swept over the face of the waters’ as creation took form and was given fullness by the command of God. The flood is described as a partial reversal of the initial creation, consistent with God’s message that his spirit would not strive forever with rebellious humanity (Genesis 1:1ff, 6:1ff, Psalm 104:30).

God’s goal in creation involves bringing creation to final fullness and humanity to destined maturity by the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote that Christ has

redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ – in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the [nations], so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:13, 14).

The law was given to Israel as a blessing. It detailed their destiny as God’s people – as his treasured possession, his royal priesthood and holy nation (Exodus 19:1ff). This gift was not remote from them and was not locked in letters on stone tablets (Deuteronomy 30:11ff). It was the living testimony of the Spirit to them that the LORD is ‘a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin’ (Exodus 34:6, 7).

David faced his moral failure at the height of his reign by pleading for God to

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you (Psalm 51:10–13).

Nehemiah reminded the nation of this understanding as he prophesied after the Babylonian exile, just as Isaiah had prophesied prior to the exile. It was the LORD who ‘gave your good spirit to instruct them’, even though ‘they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them’. This was the way God gave them the gift of calling out for and receiving his mercies: ‘Thus you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name’ (Nehemiah 9:20, 30; Isaiah 63:7–14).

The exile would end by ‘dry bones’ coming alive as a great multitude ready to live in God’s land as his people, know his abundant blessings and give testimony to

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other nations of his goodness and mercy. This reality would only come to pass because God, in his holiness, was intent on declaring his glory and love to all creation. His chosen means of achieving this restoration was by giving his people new hearts and new spirits, and by cleansing them of their immorality and rebellion (Ezekiel 36:22–37:14; Jeremiah 31:27–37).

It was this story that must have brought Nicodemus to Jesus by night. Nicodemus declared to Jesus that ‘we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God’ (John 3:2). Jesus immediately identified Nicodemus’ reference to the presence of God with the Spirit. It is this Spirit who brings new birth and blows where he wills in leading God’s new-born people.

### **The Spirit and the Exodus**

The Exodus is a major Old Testament theme. The song of Moses describes how God brings his people to maturity. His glorious salvation liberated them from slavery. Freed from bondage, he brought them to live in his promises: in the splendour of his holiness in his sanctuary (Exodus 15:1–18).

Just as the second half of the book of Exodus includes a description of the construction of the original tabernacle, the second half of the book of Ezekiel describes the building of a new temple. While much of this may seem strange to us, we might identify most readily with the references to God’s presence, to his glory, and so to his Spirit (e.g. Exodus 40:34–38; Ezekiel 43:1ff, 44:4ff, 47:1ff, 48:35; cf. Luke 2:27; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14ff; Revelation 1:20).

Similar themes in Exodus and Ezekiel can help us understand other passages that speak to Israel concerning its exile to Babylon. It may also help us see the significance of the one who would be the greater Moses and who would achieve a final Exodus (John 1; Hebrews 3, 12; cf. Luke 9:31).

Israel’s greatest problem involved more than being under foreign domination. Israel’s crisis was personal before it was political. God’s people required salvation from slavery to idols and the powers that rule through them. As well as being freed from foreign tyranny and torment, they needed rescuing from the uncleanness and pollution of evil hearts and corrupt spirits, and from attempting to achieve God’s goals by their own efforts without trusting God.

### **The Spirit and the Messiah**

Adequate help would not come to Israel apart from the one who trod the winepress alone and who brought victory by his own strength and steadfast love. Unless the LORD acted, they would not remember ‘the days of old, of Moses his servant’. They would not remember his mercy unless he reminded them! It was his presence which saved them, even though they ‘grieved his holy spirit’. He was their LORD,

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their Father-Redeemer ‘from of old’ whose compassion, zeal and might made ‘for himself an everlasting name’ (Isaiah 63:1–19, 64:1ff).

God’s final Exodus would be accomplished through his Messiah-Priest, his Servant-King. This one would be more than a prophet, he would be Immanuel, God with them. As Word become flesh, as Lamb of God, he would take away not only Israel’s sins, but the world’s sin (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18ff; John 1:1ff; cf. Numbers 11:16–30; Deuteronomy 18:15–22).

He would come ‘from the stump of Jesse’ and ‘The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD’. He would be sought for his righteous judgements by many nations and through him ‘the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea’. Great rejoicing would occur as nations ‘draw water from the wells of salvation’ and proclaim their joy by singing of the LORD’s glory and majesty (Isaiah 11 and 12).<sup>7</sup>

Yet his victory would be unlike that of other human rulers:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching (Isaiah 42:1–4; cf. Matthew 12:15–21).

His rule would be according to the manner of his victory – by the anointing of the ‘spirit of the Lord GOD’. His messianic rule would bring good news, freedom, favour, comfort, joy and praise. God’s people would be known as ‘oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory’ (Isaiah 61:1–3; cf. Luke 4:18, 19).

### **The Spirit and their destiny**

Israel’s destiny as God’s people was identified with the LORD’s victory and his subsequent rule. The coming kingdom will reveal God as sovereign in his glory and love. His people will respond to his victory by rebuilding ‘the ancient ruins’, by raising up ‘the former devastations’ and by repairing ‘the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations’. Under God’s reign, God’s people will ‘be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah’s prophecies were that Israel would go to other nations when under judgement while other nations would come to Israel when Israel lived in God’s blessings. Either way, other nations would learn of God’s redeeming holiness (or holy redemption) and faithful love (or loving faithfulness).

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wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory'. Their delight will be the same as the prophet Isaiah's (Isaiah 61:4–11).

The book of Isaiah earlier recorded a ruler reigning in righteousness as 'a hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land'. His reign will bring sense and relief to the people after times of distress and judgement:

The palace will be forsaken [and] the populous city deserted... until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. ... Happy will you be who sow beside every stream, who let the ox and the donkey range freely (Isaiah 32:1ff).

Central to this renewal is their delight in the law of the LORD and the covenant-renewal that comes from God (e.g. Psalm 1; Isaiah 54, 55; Jeremiah 31:27–35). This love of the LORD and his ways powerfully affects other nations (Micah 4; Isaiah 2) and brings them into true worship and thanksgiving. God's sanctuary becomes a house of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56) and the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (Numbers 14:20ff; Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14).

The commandments were always prophetic. Their declaration that 'You shall ...' spoke prophetically of a new day which would be established by the same grace and mercy that rescued them from slavery. Obedience would flow from their delight in God's goodness rather than from their anxious efforts to reach unobtainable goals. God's covenant was not primarily contractual. Their disobedience would bring the discipline of grace and mercy until they were ready to be asked again about their willingness to obey him in thankful love (Exodus 19ff; Deuteronomy 4 to 11, 30ff).

The renewal of humanity means the renewal of all creation and the fulfilment of Genesis 1:2 (e.g. Isaiah 65:17ff). The renewal of creation brings all the blessings, fruitfulness, abundance, peace, prosperity and fullness that God has planned. Living in sabbath rest links with true vocation. Marriage celebrates the initial glory of Eden and its final consummation. God's family is at home in his promised land. They know that all they have is from God and is known in and with him. Death is defeated and life eternal known (e.g. Isaiah 25, 26).

## **The Spirit and their life**

God's people press on 'according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear' (Haggai 2:5). His covenant promises are told from each generation to the next because the Spirit of the LORD

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is upon them (Isaiah 59:21). God's word is received with trembling by 'the humble and contrite in spirit' who marvel that the 'high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy' chooses to dwell with them and to revive them (Isaiah 57:15, 66:1ff).

The mystery and wonder of God's grace and mercy removes uncleanness and guilt (Zechariah 3:1ff). Difficulties are not overcome by human enterprise and effort apart from God. Grace and mercy come 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts' (Zechariah 4:1ff).

The life of the righteous is by faith. They do not have a proud spirit and know that 'the LORD is in his holy temple'. They know that revival will not be known unless the storms of defiance are calmed and the awesome glory of the LORD is seen and heard. Central to their prayer is that 'in wrath may [the LORD] remember [his promises of] mercy' (Habakkuk 2:4, 20–3:3).

The people of faith know hope even in the seasons of desolation and despair (Song of Solomon 2:10–13; cf. Habakkuk 3:17–19). A vivid description of this life is given in Joel 2:1ff. The day of the LORD comes as 'a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness'. The LORD executes his powerful word, and no-one can endure the confrontation that comes: 'Before [his army] the land is like the garden of Eden, but after them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them'.

God's declaration of love for his people is unaltered in judgement. Should they repent, he will reveal himself as one who is 'gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repents of evil'. Just as the creation was not to fear, but to 'be glad and rejoice, for the LORD has done great things', so God would bring joy and gladness to his people, sending them 'abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before'. The prolific harvest would be God's repayment 'for the years that the swarming locust has eaten' (Joel 2:23–27). This would be just the beginning of his blessings (Joel 2:28–32; cf. Acts 2:14ff). These blessings are as the psalmist declared:

O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone. ... Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege. ... Love the LORD, all you his saints. The LORD preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD (Psalm 31:19–24).

## Glory – a gift to Israel, for all nations

### **Israel's deliverance from Egypt**

The sabbath is blessed (cf. Genesis 2:3). Eden was a sanctuary. It was the location of holy communion between God and humanity. Stephen told the religious leadership of his day that 'the God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia' (Acts 7:2). Yet the word 'holy' is not used of God until God told Moses to 'remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' while 'glory' firstly relates to God gaining glory for himself over Pharaoh (Exodus 3:5, 14:4). Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to worship God and to be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6).

If glory is revealed holiness and holiness is hidden glory, then God's plan 'to gain glory' for himself through the Exodus was intended to benefit every nation through Israel as God's priestly people (Exodus 14:4–18). They were to enter the promised land and live in it as a renewed Eden, as a sanctuary in the creation, for the creation. The nations were to learn from Israel that God's law aligns with living an abundant life in harmony with God.

When Moses and the Israelites sang of God's glorious triumph in defeating the Egyptians, the glory of God referred to his victory, salvation and power (Exodus 15:1–13). It pointed to the majesty of his holiness and the awe of his splendour. Through his *steadfast love*, God led those whom he *redeemed* by his *strength* to his 'holy abode'. The giving of the law at Sinai revealed something of God's glory. Israel's leaders are said to have had a meal with God, while the people heard the voice of the living God and were not destroyed (Exodus 24:9–18; Deuteronomy 5:23–33). God's intention was to commune and communicate with his people in the context of his gift of sacrificial cultus and worship (Exodus 29:42–46, cf. 15:13). This divine purpose was consistent with God's revelation of his glory to Moses when God put Moses 'in a cleft of the rock' and declared himself through his goodness to be 'gracious to whom I will be gracious, and [to] show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (Exodus 33:19–23, 34:6, 7).

This was the way all the earth would be filled with God's glory, including where his people despised him. The quails and manna were evidence that 'in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord', just as was the water from the rock (Exodus 16, 17; Numbers 20). Since this covenant action was according to God's own being, those who disobeyed his voice would not want to or be permitted to enter his promised land other than by having a radical change of mind and heart (cf. Numbers 14:11–23).

### **Israel's history to the temple**

The history of Israel after the Exodus describes the departure of God's glory from them in judgement, and its return, including in the building of the temple at the

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beginning of Solomon's rule. Israel subsequently failed and went into Babylonian exile, after which it returned and rebuilt a second, lesser temple. Throughout Israel's history, the prophets declared a messianic era when this and greater glory would be revealed.

1 Samuel 4 describes the defeat of Israel and the capturing of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines. Eli's daughter-in-law died giving birth to a son whom she called Ichabod because 'The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured' (1 Samuel 4:19–22). The ark's return was celebrated by David (1 Chronicles 16:7–11). Earlier, Saul provoked God's judgement. He lost his kingship and was told that 'the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind' (1 Samuel 15: 29).

1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 5 to 7 describe the opening of the temple with the bringing of the covenant ark into it, Solomon's prayer, the 'glory of the LORD [filling] the LORD's house' and the people worshipping and giving 'thanks to the LORD, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever"' (2 Chronicles 7:1–3). David's benediction in 1 Chronicles 29:10–19 summarises God's revelation to Israel of his glory.

### **God's mercy to Israel and the nations**

The timing of the revelation of God's glory depended on God's judgements in showing mercy to Israel and the nations. The Exodus could not come until the time of the Amorites was fulfilled (Genesis 15:16). Israel was to serve, worship and fear God, and so be the royal, priestly and prophetic means whereby God would reveal his glory to the ends of the earth. This revelation would come through the blessings that flowed as judgements of mercy and grace cleared away the impediments to their calling.

Isaiah was shown God's holiness and so his glory. He was asked who would go and tell *what he had seen* to a people who would seem to see, but would not see, listen or understand until their culture and cities were destroyed and rebuilt (Isaiah 6; John 12:41). God's people are transformed as God's glory reveals a renewed, forgiven people at home in a new Eden encompassing a new earth under a new heaven.

Christ's suffering, death and resurrection reveal his glory. He is God's Word and reveals true worship as his servant. He embraces all his people and leads them to this Eden as their anointed prophet, priest and king. He is their sanctuary, with the Father and the Spirit whose glory enfolds the renewed creation where all nations are one (cf. Romans 4, 9 to 11, 15; Galatians 3; Ephesians 2).

# The life of Jesus

## The story of glory

Isaiah 40:1ff describes a prophetic anticipation of God's glory coming to his people, bringing them comfort, hope and vitality.

### The story of glory is the story of Christ

Christ was heralded with glory by the angels and on his entry into Jerusalem. A stable and the back of a donkey were his regalia. He evoked a symphony of praise to God throughout his ministry as he healed the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the blind (cf. Psalm 106:19ff). Then, on his entry to Jerusalem, he fulfilled Jeremiah's injunction (Jeremiah 9:23ff):

Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, and do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 13:4, 8:9; and John 12:27–30, 17:1–3).

On the cross, the silence spoke, and the darkness shone. The glory of God thundered through the dark silence of Golgotha (cf. Psalm 29, 96). The glory due to the LORD was given. Jesus worshipped God in the splendour of holiness as he bore the shame of our impurity.

Well might the sun in darkness hide  
And shut his glories in,  
When Christ, the mighty maker died  
For man the creature's sin.

Thus might I hide my blushing face  
While His dear cross appears,  
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,  
And melt my eyes to tears.<sup>8</sup>

Isaiah's message about the disgrace, shame and suffering of God's servant, and his subsequent triumph and glory was direct and clear:

*Just as there were many who were astonished at him – so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals – so he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him' (Isaiah 52:14, 15, cf. 53:1–12, italics added).*

Psalm 22 similarly described someone who was forsaken of God and who lay in the dust of death declaring (Psalm 22:27):

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;

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<sup>8</sup> Isaac Watts, 'Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed,' [https://hymnary.org/text/alas\\_and\\_did\\_my\\_savior\\_bleed](https://hymnary.org/text/alas_and_did_my_savior_bleed).

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and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.  
For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

There ‘God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong’. There God’s foolishness was wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness was stronger than human strength. There ‘God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are’. There the Lord of glory was crucified by the ignorance of the rulers of this age (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:8).

Recall Nathanael, Jacob and the *rise* and *fall* of the nations. Contrast the *descent* and *ascent* of Christ in Ephesians 4:10. Christ was not ashamed to bear our shame. It was his glory to bear our shame that we, freed from shame, would bear his glory (Hebrews 1:2, 2:9–10).

There our glory was unveiled: ‘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). There, ‘the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God … shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:4–6). There we learn that no other true glory exists but the glory of the cross (cf. Galatians 6:14; 1 Corinthians 2:4; Philippians 3:20), and that this glory is enough to heal and sustain the nations forever (Romans 16:25ff).

### **The story of glory is the victory of Christ over the nations**

Whereas the harlot gave herself glory, the bride has the glory of God given for her light (Revelation 18:7, 21:23; cf. Psalm 86:9). The nations bring their glory into the eternal city. Their sufferings as Christ’s witnesses shape them for their glorious freedom as God’s family (Romans 8:17; Acts 14:21; 1 Peter 1:7).

When all around is sin and pain,  
And death is near and life is vain,  
Thy glory breaks from out the tomb  
As new life issues from its womb,  
And I am caught to You on high,  
Where strong strong love can never die.<sup>9</sup>

The prophet’s exhortation was for the people to

Lift up your eyes and look around; … your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. (Isaiah 60:1ff).

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<sup>9</sup> *New Creation Hymn Book*, 30.

## Christ's hidden glory in his incarnation and ministry

### Introduction

There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege-works against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, 'Wisdom is better than might; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded'. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good (Ecclesiastes 9:14–18).

Jesus was a 'poor wise man' who saved God's people: 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9; cf. Philippians 2:5–11).

Jesus had no place to put his head (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58), yet he told his disciples that 'at the renewal of all things, ... the Son of Man [will be] seated on the throne of his glory'. It is the throne of *his* glory, glory hidden in the homelessness of his incarnation (Matthew 19:28, 25:31, cf. 24:30; Mark 8:38, 13:26; Luke 21:27, 24:26; cf. John 1:10, 11).

### His hidden glory

How much of Christ's glory is hidden? How can anyone presume to speak of seeing the hidden glory of his incarnation and ministry, especially since his humanity is still present today in the heavens and with us by the Holy Spirit?

In one sense, his glory is fully hidden. No-one can see any of his glory unless it is revealed. Yet the wonder of his incarnation and ministry is not that a little glory has come and, though hidden, was revealed to some people. This might seem reasonable since he was only one person and only on earth for a few years. It is remarkable that in him *so much* glory was given and *so much* glory was seen, and that this glory *so often* blinded rather than brought sight and insight.

This glory, *his* glory, was not simply evident while he walked the earth, but through all of history. The greatness of his glory is at once hidden and yet at the same time revealed, and that in abundance. His glory is consistent with the glory revealed by the universe. Yet it is only by faith that we notice that:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1; cf. Psalm 8; Numbers 14:21; Isaiah 6:3, 24:16; Habakkuk 2:14).

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become

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children of God ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ... 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 1:11–18).

Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. This was to fulfil the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' ... Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him (John 12:37–41).

### His early ministry

What is this hidden glory, and how is it seen? In the synoptic Gospels, we see the evidence of Jesus' glory in his ministry to the people. It was just as Jesus answered the messengers from John the Baptist:

'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me' (Luke 7:22, 23; Matthew 11:2–6).

The fulfilment of the prophecy Simeon made when Jesus was presented at the Jerusalem Temple that Jesus would be 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' required more than the outpouring of God's divine mercy and kindness seen in these miracles. It involved the consolation or comfort of Jerusalem through the full ministry of their Saviour, just as the angels prophesied to the shepherds (Luke 2:1–38, cf. 1:67–79).

The crisis about glory became clearer as Jesus' ministry continued. He urged those who were healed to keep silent about who he was and 'sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah' (e.g. Matthew 16:20). His true glory would only be fully revealed in and through his death and resurrection (Matthew 16:21–28; Mark 9:30–32, 10:32–34, 45).

Jesus taught his disciples about the coming kingdom of God and how John was its forerunner. This meant that, although John was great, the least in the kingdom would be even greater. They would clearly see the glories of the coming kingdom (cf. Matthew 11, 16)! Yet those around would not respond positively to this revelation of divine glory. The mystery of Jesus' relationship with the Father, in the Spirit, would be hidden from intellectuals, but seen by infants. Only those who learned from him of his relationship with the Father would come to know the Father and his plan for heaven and earth (Matthew 11:16–30; John 17:1–26).

### **His transfiguration and crucifixion**

The transfiguration was a crucial event between his baptism and betrayal. All events prior to it pointed to it, while all that followed it resulted from it. Something of his hidden glory was revealed to three disciples. Although they saw divine glory (1 Peter 1:10–25; 2 Peter 1:16–21), they were not yet able to understand what they saw on the mountain (Matthew 17:1–13; Luke 9:28–56).

The testimony of Golgotha is that Jesus' glory is most clearly seen when the glories of this world are exposed and extinguished. There, and uniquely there, we see his glory in his becoming sin for us and bearing our curse (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13). No eternal city can be built, which purified humanity can inhabit forever, other than by his glory dissolving and defeating our shame, scourge and scandal. In building this city, Jesus became darkened in the darkness; he died our death so that we can be lightened in and by his light. He was shamed by our shame so that we can be glorified by his glory. This mystery is the hidden glory which is truly seen by knowing him who is the genuine light set on the hill; crucified for us yet shining out the eternal glory of God the Father, Son and Spirit. This grace is his glory; his glory is seen most clearly in his grace (Ephesians 1:1–23, 2 Corinthians 4:1–7).

The climax of history will be the full revelation and realisation of his hidden glory. Until then his glory is hidden to the extent that we do not look at him whom we have pierced:

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. So it is to be. Amen (Revelation 1:7).

### **Signs of his glory**

The Gospels reveal something of his hidden glory. Consider, for example, the wedding at Cana, where, even though 'My hour has not yet come', he met the immediate practical need of his hosts. John commented that '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).

The woman at the Samaritan well at Sychar came to see that Jesus was the Messiah. His living water quenched a thirst that water from Jacob's well could not even touch. The people were convinced that 'this is truly the Saviour of the world'. Jesus, responding to the urging of his disciples that he ate something, explained that his food was to 'do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work'. True worship overflows from the eternal life that gushes up from the living water that Messiah gives (John 4:4–41).

The man by the pool of Bethesda whom Jesus healed on the sabbath day by commanding him to 'stand up, take up your mat and walk' knew something of

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Jesus' glory. Afterwards Jesus distinguished between human glory and divine glory. He said that he did not 'accept glory from human beings' and then asked the Jewish leaders '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?' They would not have eternal life unless they received his testimony concerning his Father (John 5:1–47, cf. 7:18).

The man born blind could see what those with normal sight missed (John 9:1–41). Jesus had explained that his Father glorifies him and that there is no future in him glorifying himself, yet the religious leadership said they wanted glory given to God but could not see the glory God had given (John 8:49–59)!

Jesus declared that Lazarus's illness was 'for God's glory' and pointed out that to believe in Jesus was to 'see the glory of God'. Jesus wept that they could not see the glory that was revealed in Lazarus' being raised from the dead. Though they believed him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, they did not believe he was 'the resurrection and the life' (John 11:1–44).

### **Revealing his eternal glory – to us!**

Jesus said his life was a revelation of the glory 'that [he] had in [his Father's] presence before the world existed'. He sought only his Father's glory, and that his own glory would be in his Father's presence. It was this glory that he shared with the disciples and which flowed to those with whom he had contact; especially those whom he healed. This is the glory he prayed for us to see. It is this glory which is his because his Father loved him from 'before the world existed' (John 17:1–26, especially 17:5, 22 and 24; cf. Matthew 11:25–30).

This glory is the mystery of which the angels sang at his birth. It is the fulfilment of the prophecies of Mary and Zechariah, and of the revelations given to Joseph and Elizabeth. The centre of God's action in Jesus is in his mercy, as he had promised. Jesus fulfils God's covenantal promises to deliver his people from their enemies, and to give them a holy, righteous and peaceful life. These promises flow from God's mercy by which we come to know God's salvation and find our sins forgiven:

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 1:68–79)

No wonder the angelic host responded to the announcement of 'good news of great joy for all the people: [that] to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord' with their anthem of 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' (Luke 2:8–14; cf. Matthew 1:18–25).

## The Son comes from the Father

### Preliminary

Epiphany celebrates the coming of the wise men, and hence the appearing of Christ to the nations. It ends the Advent season during which the church focuses on the coming of Christ in his incarnation and looks forward to his return. The church lives in the reality of Christ's coming in the Spirit now, knowing what he has already accomplished, and anticipating his final appearing (*epiphany*). One New Testament word for coming and presence is *parousia*, which with revelation (*apocalypse*) and appearing (*epiphany*) anticipate the fullness (*pleroma*) and completion of God's purposes (*telos*), the end of history (*eschaton*). Hence Jesus' coming refers to his incarnation, his presence now in the Spirit, and his coming again. This is summed up in a liturgy for the Lord's Supper with the declarations 'We are the body of Christ. His Spirit is with us' and 'Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again'.<sup>10</sup>

### Introduction

The prologue of John's Gospel can be considered in 5 sections:

- The Word and God (John 1:1, 2)
- The Word and creation (John 1:3–5)
- The Word and John the Baptist (John 1:6–8).
- The Word Incarnate (John 1:9–14).
- The Word's surpassing excellence (John 1:15–18).<sup>11</sup>

The focus of this study is on 'The Word Incarnate', especially John 1:11, 12:

He came to *what was his own*, and his *own people* did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (italics added).

Two major questions arise from a study of the incarnation:

- What relationship is there between believing in one God and believing in Christ's divinity?
- What does it mean that Christ was simultaneously divine and human?

The history of the church includes various attempts at answering these questions. While the issues may seem remote to us, they affect the nature of cultures and hence history. Since humanity is the image of God, both as persons and collectively as peoples, we can reflect on ourselves and nations in these terms. Indeed, considerable international upheaval is closely related to Western Catholic,

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<sup>10</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, (Sydney, NSW: Anglican Information Office, 1978), 145, 147.

<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 71–128.

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Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Islamic and Jewish communities. While it might be helpful to outline the historical debates and the ways they shape nations, this study looks at these two questions in the context of John 1:11.

### **'He came'**

#### ***Who is this one who came?***

The one who came is the eternal Son, Word, image and heir.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people (John 1:1–3).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things ... were created ... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15–17).

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1–3a).

The Son, as the eternal Son of the Father, is the one by whom, through whom and for whom all things were created. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the one through whom the Father made the universe, and the one, who, by his word, sustains all things. All things came into being through him, and their life comes from his life which is the light of all peoples. Christ is the first-born of creation, and Word, image, Son and heir. He is God!

#### ***From whom did he come? Who sent him?***

He came from the Father-Creator, in the power of the Holy Spirit:

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Matthew 3:17, 17:5, cf. 11:25–27; Mark 1:1).

John 1:14–18 speaks of the Word as the Father's only Son, developing 1:1, while John 3:16, 34, 35, 5:19–24, 37, 6:29, 38, 42, 51, 57, 7:16, 28–36, 40–43, 8:14–16, 23–29, 12:42, all speak of the Father sending him, and of his delighting to do his Father's work. These references affirm the unity of the Father and the Son:

So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed (John 17:5, also 17:3, 18, 24, 25).

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us (Romans 8:32).

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... for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Corinthians 8:6).

... when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"' (Hebrews 10:5).

Jesus was more than a human person who was like God as a child images their parents. He is the eternal as well as the incarnate Son. He is the Word who is eternally with the Father in all the Father does. He delights in his Father's will. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of their communion, eternally having his own being and sharing in one centre of consciousness with the Father and the Son. All their intrinsic fellowship is evident in the incarnation and focused in the cross and resurrection. Our life and relationships, and every aspect of the creation, including its genesis and glory, are from him.

### *How did he come?*

He came in the flesh, as the outpouring of God, with the Spirit.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3).

In Philippians 2:5ff, it is the nature of God not to exploit others but to empty himself; not to grasp but to give. This emptying was the pouring of himself, as divinity, into humanity. He took the form of a slave and became obedient to death by crucifixion. First the emptying, then the humility; note the parallelism.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9).

He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory (1 Timothy 3:16).

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... that was with the Father and was revealed to us (1 John 1:1–3).

The one who came was the revelation of God. Rather than limiting God, he revealed, explained and declared God to be Father, Son and Spirit (John 1:18). That he came in the flesh, not in the likeness of flesh, and not in sinful flesh is central to the nature of God and humanity. He had created humanity in his own image, and he came as the fullest expression humanity can receive of God. He was

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the fullest expression God can give of himself. He was fully human and fully God, in one person. Here was no God with a human skin, and no human possessed by God's Son. He shared 'flesh and blood' (Hebrews 2:14). His humanity was 'from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1:20; cf. Genesis 1:26–31; Luke 1:35) and God gave him 'the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34).

### *How did he live? In dependence, as sinless, in weakness*

His dependence and obedience are evident in his relationship with his Father, with creation, and with people (John 4). His sinlessness is also clear: he 'knew no sin' (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 1:19, 2:22; Hebrews 4:15, 7:26). He was tempted, and learnt obedience through suffering (Hebrews 2:18, 4:15, 5:2, 7). All, therefore, that he did, he did in his humanity, in the Spirit, and from his Father. He made no special access to his divinity to sustain him, other than that access available to all humanity as creatures under God.

### **'To his own'**

### *Where did he come? To whom did he come?*

In coming to Abraham's and David's descendants, he came by both creation and covenant to his own homeland and people:

Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).

According to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever (Luke 1:55).

Son of Adam, Son of God (Luke 3:38).

Descended from David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3, 4).

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4).

God spoke to our ancestors ... by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds (Hebrews 1:3).

He did not come without indication or preparation. He did not come to any random location or situation or nation. He came as the second Adam (Luke 3:38) and the second Noah (Matthew 25:37), inheriting the creational commission given to Adam and Eve to fill and subdue the earth, and re-affirmed to Noah (Matthew 6:33). He came to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17).

He came as heir of the covenants with Abraham and David. When Abraham was called from his country and kindred, he was promised a new homeland and many descendants. He was told that the nations would be blessed or cursed according to their treatment of him. Abraham learnt that blessing, faith and righteousness were of one essence (Romans 4:1–9, 13; Galatians 3:6–9). He was affirmed in the

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coming of Melchizedek and through the sacrifice at Mt. Moriah. He knew that the promises would be fulfilled through his offspring. His heir is Christ (Galatians 3:16, 29, 4:5, 6, 28; Ephesians 3:6).

Psalm 2 describes rebellious nations trying to establish themselves in defiance of God and his anointed. The Son-heir knew the promise that his Father would 'make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession'. It is this Son who provides refuge from wrath and judgement and so brings true blessings to the nations.

Zechariah prophesied that a saviour would come from 'the house of his servant David' and according to 'the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham'. 'The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' is the one who fulfils the covenants of Abraham and David. He is the one declared by the Baptist; the one who Simeon declared as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 1:69–75; John 1:29).

**'His own did not accept him'**

*How was the Son received when he came?*

The Son's glory was in his death. There he was one with his Father, and one with humanity:

This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours (Mark 12:7).

They were saying, 'Is not this Jesus, the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"' (John 6:42, cf. 7:40–42).

It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50).

He 'had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him ... We accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted' (Isaiah 53:2, 4). His pouring of his divinity into his humanity (Philippians 2:6–8) was so that, as the suffering servant, he could give of himself even to death (cf. Isaiah 53:12). It is the glory of the Son to become human, to be a slave, and to 'become obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross'. All we see in the incarnation is best seen through his cross (Philippians 2:5–11; John 12:28, 17:1–5, 10, 22–24; 1 Corinthians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Hebrews 2:5–9).

He alone came from his Father and was never cut off from his Father. His coming from his Father was the essence of his sonship; his fellowship with his Father was the evidence that he did not come of himself. His coming therefore expresses not only himself, but his Father, and the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son. He

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came from his Father, but was never apart from him as Son, even though, in the mystery of his dying, he experienced the abandonment of God to and by God's humanity. Likewise, he was never apart from humanity, knowing, in his death, our attempted abandonment of God as we grasp after evil's false inheritance. He took the spoils, disarmed the accuser, and bore the wrath we experience in defying deity (John 8:31–59; Colossians 2:15; Ephesians 4:8–10; Hebrews 2:14–18).

**'But to all who received him'**

*Why did he come? What was to result from his coming?*

He came to bring the blessings promised to Abraham and David. He is coming now in Spirit, and again! He is human forever:

... that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ... to grant us that we ... might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (Luke 1:69–75).

... to deal with sin (Romans 8:3).

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

... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

... 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 5:19–21).

... a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ... [and God] has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:8–23).

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32).

... that he might come to have first place in everything Colossians 1:18).

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

... In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Peter 3:9–13).

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The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ … The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon’ (Revelation 22:17, 20).

The blessings promised to Abraham and David are realised in Christ. These blessings include justification by faith, righteousness, and the life of knowing God in purity and love as his people. The blessings of covenant are focused on Messiah, who, as Son of the Father, inherits the nations and receives the ends of the earth as his possession. His inheritance is realised in the new creation where the new heavens and the new earth, and all who live in them, are indeed the LORD’s (cf. Psalm 24 KJV). Hence, by bringing creation, including humanity, to fulfilment, he receives what was promised to him before creation and in covenant (2 Corinthians 1:20, 7:1). He brings us to a new homeland in a new family (John 14:2).

The full meaning of his coming is only understood in his going to the Father and what follows from that (John 8:12, 10:18, 13:32–35). He returns to his Father but does not forfeit his humanity. Rather, he brings God’s entire family to glory and maturity. He pours out the Spirit so that we will receive the full inheritance. He comes in the Spirit and is coming again! Only a truly incarnate Son can do this, and only through the cross (John 14 to 17; Hebrews 2:10–14)!

Only the incarnate Son can save a fallen humanity. Humanity must be saved through a human person (Genesis 3:15), and only God can save. Only Christ can perform the required ministry. Only he is Son forever (Hebrews 1:5–13, 2:5–8, 3:3, 4:14–16, 5:5, 6, 6:19, 20, 7:20–22, 8:1, 9:15, 23–28, 10:12–25, 12:1–3, 13:8, 20). Only he can turn curses into blessings and prepare us for the Jerusalem above (Galatians 3:10–14, 4:21–31). Only he can ‘present the church to himself in splendour’ as his bride (Ephesians 5:22–33). Only he can fulfil the promise that God will be with his people and bring them their eternal inheritance (Revelation 21:1–7).

## Conclusion

The Son is one with God and one with humanity. Our positive response by faith is his Father’s heritage, by his will.

Although the Son coming from the Father might seem obvious, this is only possible because of the utter holiness, love and generosity of both the Father and the Son. This self-giving is evident in the Son’s willing submission in his humanity to his Father and in his Father’s participation in and affirmation of all that his Son does as a human person. They are one in intention, being and purpose, and without any superiority and inferiority.

The Son did not simply come to observe, to provide a critique, or to recommend a plan of action. He came to defeat evil. He came as a human person because such a victory must necessarily come from within humanity and be eternally enjoyed by humanity. He came vulnerable but confident that the testing of God by evil

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would vindicate his Father and redeem God's people. He came from the Father-Creator, who is eternally Redeemer (cf. Isaiah 63:16). This Covenant-Father had spoken through the prophets and spoke through his Son. The Son talked of the inheritance of the Father coming to him and so to God's family. This is the heritage he won by shedding his blood, through which access is opened to God to receive God's promised inheritance:

[Christ Jesus] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both [Jew and Gentile] have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:17–18; cf. Acts 20:32; Ephesians 1:7, 11, 2:11–21; Revelation 21:1–7).

Without our responding in loving holiness and thankful worship we will not enter the kingdom of Christ and of his God and share in 'the riches of [the Father's] glorious inheritance among the saints' (Ephesians 1:18, 5:5). Such a response can only come from us in Christ: 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:12, 13).

## The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

### Context

Jesus was declared to be God's anointed one, his Messiah, his Christ, at his baptism. The voice from heaven identified him as the Father's beloved Son and as ruler over God's people (Psalms 2:4–8, 89:26, 27 and 110:1, 2). It set him apart for his priestly ministry (Psalm 110:4) and nominated him as the suffering servant (Isaiah 42:1). The descent of the dove affirmed all of this: Jesus was *the* prophet; *the* fulfilment of all the Spirit's testimony and witness through the prophets. He had to be anointed by a prophet, by John the Baptist, to be crowned king and to be the Messiah, Son, servant, priest and 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:24–36).

His anointing was no mere ceremony or ritual, and no formality. It was a *filling*; it was a *fulfilling*. He had come 'to fulfil all righteousness' (Matthew 3:15). The incarnate Son received from the Father the 'Spirit without measure' (John 3:34). When Peter declared to Cornelius that 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; [and that] he went about doing all manner of good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38), Peter was emphasising that this anointing was with a view to his death and resurrection (Acts 10:39–40; cf. John 3:33–36). The Spirit of the Lord was upon him to lead him *to* and *through* the cross. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world baptises with the Spirit and fire (John 1:29–36; Luke 3:15–17). No aspect of his life, death and resurrection was separate from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

### Event

Jesus declared the scope and extent of his calling on his arrival at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30). He was not simply proclaiming a philosophy or an ideal but was pastorally indicating what would be happening. His proclamation was one with that in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7). There he blessed and taught, here he declared this as his calling. He had come to bring good news to the poor, to release captives, to give sight to the blind, to free those who were oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. The impact of his proclamation was immediate. Those at Nazareth remained spiritually poor and blind, captive to their false views of Jesus and not experiencing God's favour, while those at the mountain received his blessings.

His preaching implied that his hearers were hostage to something more terrible than Egypt, Babylon, or their current oppressors, Rome, and were not living in the blessings promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3), Moses (Exodus 15:22–27, Deuteronomy 30:15–20) and the prophets. How terrible their situation! Yet how wonderful a Saviour: now standing in their midst and proclaiming good news. He had come to *do* his Father's will: to save them from their sins, to send God's Holy

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Spirit upon them. God had sent a person, not a program or a policy! This jubilee of grace required the deepest surgery of all (Jeremiah 6:13–17; Zechariah 13:7–9). Only someone filled with the Spirit could do it, and only God’s Spirit could fill this one to do it! The prophecy of Isaiah 61 links with 42:1–7 and hence with 52:13 and 53:4–8!

### Consequence

Jesus had come as the Spirit had promised the prophets; he had come with the Father’s promise that the Spirit would be with him. Yet, more than this, Jesus had come with the Father’s promise that his own exaltation would be in his death and resurrection, and that this would include the Father giving him the Spirit to pour out on God’s people. The Father had not only promised a Messiah to the people, he had promised the Spirit to the Messiah for his ministry and had promised that this Messiah would be the person who would pour out the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit would be with them and us as was with and in him (Acts 2:32–33).

On the evening of the day of his resurrection, Jesus twice declared peace to his disciples. The first time he showed them his hands and side, and the second time he breathed the Spirit on them: ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (John 20:19–22). He meant that, just as in his death he had taken our spiritlessness into himself, so we would receive his Spirit, and receiving his Spirit, would then, in him, proclaim his salvation. The Spirit has united us with Christ in his death so that the ascended Christ could fill us with the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord was upon him to send the Spirit upon us, so that, in union with him in his death and resurrection, we would bring his good news to those in need, his liberation to captives and his gift of sight to those who are blind.

As we are strengthened by the Spirit to know the love of Christ, we cannot help but worship the Father who has gathered his complete family together to forever glory in his grace (Ephesians 2:15–22, 3:14–19) This is the full liberation and jubilee that Christ has proclaimed. Through him the Father has anointed us with his Spirit to declare this great day of the Lord.

Jesus’ words answered the prophetic lament of Jeremiah 8:18–9:2. An African-American spiritual expresses something of this lament and suggests a solution.

Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work’s in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again:  
*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole,*  
*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

You cannot sing like angels, you cannot preach like Paul,  
But you can tell of Jesus and say he died for all:  
*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole,*  
*There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

## **Jesus: the man of faith, hope and love**

### **He trusts in God**

The chief priests, scribes and elders mocked Jesus because although ‘He trusts in God’ he could not ‘come down from the cross’ (Matthew 27:43). They assumed his trust was misplaced and ill-informed. But they were wrong (John 5:45, cf. 5:19, 20, 30, 36b, 37a). He had been about his Father’s business from childhood. His hope was evident at his baptism: he knew what was needed to ‘fulfill all righteousness’ (Matthew 3:15). He rebuked Satan in the wilderness for testing his faith by suggesting that anyone should live other than by every word that comes from God’s mouth. The Lord’s prayer and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount speak of seeking the kingdom of God – indicating a life of true faith and hope, and not one like other nations (cf. Ephesians 2:12).

His own faith was clear when he stilled the storm and rebuked the disciples for their small faith (Matthew 8:26)! The same implication was evident when his disciples could not cast out a demon from a boy (Matthew 17:17).

At his trial Jesus was full of hope (Matthew 26:67). From his transfiguration onwards, his goal was his cross, with his time in Gethsemane revealing more of his faith and hope in God (Matthew 26:36ff).

He had faith to enter the horror of human depravity and degradation on the cross; into its faithlessness, hopelessness and lovelessness (Matthew 27:46). But even in that hour his witness remained one of trust in God (John 20:28–30, Luke 24:46).

### **Believe also in me**

His faith, hope and love were not commodities, but qualities that expressed his relationship with God as his Father and with the Holy Spirit. They indicated something of the eternal relationships of God (John 3:34–36).

There is no doubting Jesus’ trust in God throughout his life. John’s Gospel records that he talked of his delight in only ever doing his Father’s will. He spoke of himself as the way to, the truth of, and the life of his Father. He spoke of the certainty of his death and resurrection, and of his return to his Father – from whom he had come.

Jesus assured his disciples that there was much in which they could hope. He placed himself in the centre of their hopes, and as the object of their faith. There are, he assured them, many mansions in his Father’s house. He insisted that he alone reveals the Father and that they would not be left as orphans. He said that he alone would send the Holy Spirit to tell the true story of God. He declared that he alone was the true vine in whom we, as branches, bear fruit and flourish (John 14 to 16).

### Grace overflowed

Paul wrote to Timothy of the mercy Paul received, and that in this mercy ‘the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus’ (1 Timothy 1:12–17). The apostle identified Jesus’ faith – and so Jesus’ hope – and Jesus’ love with the overflow of the Lord’s grace to him. This outpouring of God’s love was evident in the mercy of God to Paul in Christ Jesus, the coming of Jesus into the world to save sinners such as Paul, the display of God’s patience in making Paul an example to those who would come to faith, and God’s judging of Paul as faithful and appointing him to God’s service. Because of God’s ministry to and through Paul, Paul ascribed ‘honour and glory forever and ever’ ‘to the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God’.

In 2 Timothy 1:6–14 Paul linked ‘the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus’ (verse 13) with

- God saving us and calling us ‘with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace’.
- the grace ‘revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus’ and ‘given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began’.
- Christ abolishing death and bringing ‘life and immortality to light through the gospel’.
- Paul’s appointment to his ministry and his suffering for the gospel.
- the good treasure entrusted to him in the Spirit.

It is not surprising that Paul again said that he relied on the power of God and that he was not ashamed of continually knowing and trusting Christ.

### Looking to Jesus

Since faith and hope are closely related – ‘faith is the assurance of things hoped for’ and hope is the expectation of the things that faith anticipates – we may speak of the faith, hope and love that are in Christ Jesus (cf. Hebrews 11:1ff). The readers of Hebrews were urged not to lose heart as they knew that the Lord’s loving discipline helped them lay their burdens aside and focus their affections, faith and hope on Jesus, who gives faith, hope and love to his people (Hebrews 12:1–6).

This teaching was set in the context of those who ‘were commended for their faith’ (Hebrews 11:39). They testified to Jesus; they were his witnesses (cf. 1 Peter 1:10–12 and 2 Peter 1:16–21). They were looking for one who would be ‘the pioneer and perfecter of [their] faith’; one whom the writer of Hebrews called ‘the apostle and high priest of our confession’ (Hebrews 12:2, 3:1ff).

Jesus revealed complete human trust and faith in the faithfulness of God. He was at once the goal and the source of the faith of the ‘cloud of witnesses’ in Hebrews 11. In him the faithfulness of God was expressed by a human person in the fullness of true humanity. In him the purposes of God living among us and bringing us to

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himself were realised: ‘Who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame ...’ (Hebrews 12:1). This joy included him declaring his Father to his brothers and sisters – to his bride, to God’s family – and his bringing God’s sons and daughters to his Father as one family, as his bride, cleansed and sanctified for the great marriage supper (cf. Hebrews 2:10ff; Ephesians 5:21ff; Revelation 19ff).

The link between joy and hope is very clear: ‘The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to nothing’ (Proverbs 10:28; cf. Romans 15:13).

### **Jesus: our living hope**

To speak of Jesus’ hope as a human person among us in these terms is rich, but his hope is not only something to which he looked. It is that which he is accomplishing and in which he is participating (Hebrews 3:1ff). It is the goal of triune communion into which we are taken in him. It is an inheritance that is ours as ‘a living hope through the resurrection of the dead’. Here is the rich certainty of the genuine faith in which we live, full of joy in knowing we will see our hope, even Jesus Christ himself (1 Peter 1:3–9; cf. 2 Peter 1:3).

This is ‘the salvation of our souls’. It is our life of loving him whom we ‘do not see now’. Those who are God’s children have seen ‘what love the Father has given us’ in calling us (and in order that he can call us) his children. In his love we live, knowing, by faith and with sure hope, that we will ‘see him as he is’, and be ‘pure and holy before him’ (1 John 3:1ff; Luke 1:68–79).

We share the riches of Christ’s faithfulness, of his purposes and promises by the Spirit,

for through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus ... the only thing that counts is faith working through love (Galatians 5:5, 6).

The Holy Spirit, in the faithfulness of God in Christ, brings us to the goal the Father has for us. This is God’s triune faithfulness working through love. No wonder Paul says that ‘we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God’ (Romans 5:2). No wonder this divine action transforms us, conforming us to the image of God who is his beloved Son and who has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and given us ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:4–6; cf. Philippians 3:20, 21; Colossians 3:10). No wonder Peter wrote that through Christ we ‘have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God’ (1 Peter 1:21).

### **Come unto me**

When John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus whether he was the Messiah, Jesus spoke of the healings and deliverances that were happening. He went on to compare his generation with children who did not know when and with whom to mourn or rejoice. Their folly inevitably meant judgement. In contrast to this faithless, hopeless and loveless situation, Jesus called them to himself. He said his yoke was easy and his burden was light, and that his life of triune communion with the Father in the Spirit was being shown to them. The 'Father, the Lord of heaven and earth' promised rest for those who come to his Son, even the sabbath rest missed out on by Israel in the wilderness. Jesus calls us as the true person of faith, hope and love. He urges us to live in his faith, hope and love (Matthew 11; Hebrews 3, 4).

### **Additional note on living in faith, hope and love**

We are certain to suffer because of these realities. Yet that suffering shapes, fits and refines us to participate in Jesus' resurrection, eternal life. It is through these sufferings that God proclaims to the world that we are his, that our hope is sure, that nothing can separate us from his love, and that our faith cannot be removed (cf. Job 1:8). God's delight is in his people who are in his Son, and God does not *create* evil.

As God's people, we share these things together, and can speak of each other's 'work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thessalonians 1:3). We can encourage each other to wear faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet (1 Thessalonians 5:8). Our instruction aims to see love flow from 'a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith' in full hope and assurance (1 Timothy 1:5).

'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13). Faith, hope and love remain forever as God is always faithful and is eternally the God of purpose and promise. Further, the greatness of his faithfulness, purposes and promises is, according to Paul, in his love. It is his love and light that are revealed to us as God rescues us in and from the corruption that is in this world and makes us participants of his own triune divine nature (2 Peter 1:1–11).

Faith and hope in Christ are ours because 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). It is this faith and hope that are God's gift to us to take us into his triune love now and for all eternity. It is for this reason that we are called 'for the sake 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' (Titus 1:1ff). What a calling! What a God! What faithfulness, what promises in which to hope, and what love in which to live!

## The Father is king: The Son is king

### The Son is king

We may be aware of national and international raging against the LORD and his Messiah (Psalm 2:1–4, 110:1ff; cf. Romans 12:2). We may at times live as terrorists seeking to sabotage the divine government. We may think and act as though we are judge and God is on trial (cf. Job 38:1–3, 40:1–7, 42:1–6).

The writer of Psalm 2 was not fist shaking.<sup>12</sup> He was questioning defiance and opposition to God's sovereignty. He was declaring the futility of rebellion against God's son-king. The psalmist testified that history is affected when God speaks and acts through and by his son-king. God's sovereignly appointed son-king subdues rebellion on God's behalf. He acts with such momentum that resisting him equates with resisting God. God terrifies and rebukes the nations through him and treats their rebellion with derision.

Refuge is offered in and by God's son-king – a refuge which brings joy and reveals the essential nature of God's response to rebellion. God's wrath is his refusal to act in the same way as the nations are described as acting. The son-king's primary goal is to bring creation under God's reign by being God's messenger and intervener (see also Isaiah 59, 63; Revelation 19:11–16).

### Behold the Lamb!

These psalms helped the early church understand Jesus' life, death and resurrection (e.g. Acts 4:23–31; Revelation 2:27; cf. Acts 26:14 and Psalm 2:3). The Father's majesty was evident to them since his Son 'had made purification for sins', had liberated them from their fear of death, and had made them into God's holy family (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:1–2:18, 5:1–10). Jesus' removal of sin was so decisive that "he sat down at the right hand of God" and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." (Hebrews 7:26–8:1, 9:26ff, 10:12, 13; Mark 16:19–20).

This is the glory and exaltation of the suffering servant who Isaiah declared would 'act wisely', 'be raised and lifted up and highly exalted', 'sprinkle many nations', and 'divide the spoils with the strong'. What could be more majestic than the prophet's declaration: 'Surely he bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows ...' (Isaiah 52:13–53:12; NIV)? This servant brings God's family to glory, having been crowned with the glory and honour of tasting death for everyone (Hebrews 2:5–18).

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<sup>12</sup> Psalms 2 and 110 use ancient-near-eastern conquest-covenant language familiar to its Jewish readers. Early Christian communities understood Jesus' gospel as further reframing patriarchal-dynastic language, choosing to repudiate rather than replicate the violent, predatory hostility that usually accompanied invasions and insurrections (cf. Matthew 20:26, 27, 23:11; Mark 10:42ff; Luke 22:26ff).

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He alone is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. This slain and resurrected Lamb has made people from every tribe, nation and tongue into a priestly kingdom (Revelation 1, 5 and 7), making the impact of overthrowing the powers of darkness clearly visible (John 15:18ff, 16:33; 1 John 4:4, 5:19; Revelation 6:15–17).

Paul exhorted his readers to be imitators of God and pointed out that Messiah ascended after he had descended (the opposite of the rise and fall of human empires). Jesus rids us of our raging anger through his fragrant sacrifice to live in this love that gives us an inheritance in the ‘kingdom of Christ and of God’ (Ephesians 4:7–10, 4:29–5:6; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). Our inheritance comes to us from the Father with the same strength that raised Jesus from the dead and placed him in supreme authority in this age and the age to come (Ephesians 1:17–23; 1 Corinthians 8:5, 6). The consequence of being one with Messiah and in fellowship with the Spirit is having the same mind-set as Jesus, God’s servant-king (Philippians 2:1–11; cf. 1 John 2:6).

Paul similarly exhorted the Colossian Christians to live a life worthy of the Lord, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who ‘rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’ (Colossians 1:9–14). The triumph of the cross stripped the world’s authorities of their power over him and ‘made a public example of them’ (Colossians 2:13–15; cf. Psalm 2:4–9).

Paul’s theology developed Psalm 2:10–12 by calling his readers to be wise, to serve the Lord with fear, and to rejoice with trembling (e.g. Romans 12:9–21). This was Paul’s message of the cross, of our being adopted into God’s family through the atonement that God provided (cf. 1 John 2:1–2 and 3:1–3).

### The king of love

Psalm 2 has God install his Son in his wrath: John 3:16 in his love. Yet there is no conflict between God’s wrath and his love.<sup>13</sup> His wrath is what we experience when we reject the unceasing persistence of his love. There is condemnation in both passages for those who hate the light and salvation for those who believe in the Son (John 3:16–21). Rejecting the Son leaves us under God’s wrath (John 3:36). The ‘one who … is above all’ is king (John 3:31). He declared the decree of the Lord as he gave his testimony, telling what he had seen and heard (John 3:32). This royal ruler not only communicated God’s message, he received ‘the Spirit without measure’ as Anointed One, as Messiah (John 3:34). He acted from his

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<sup>13</sup> Wrath and love are not *dual* equivalents. There is no *duel* between them. God is love but not wrath. When ‘Steadfast love and faithfulness … meet’ and ‘righteousness and peace … kiss each other’ (Psalm 85:10), they greet each other in complete harmony, total unity and full accord, without any contention, priority or hierarchy.

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experience of the Father's love; all that he did was in the overflow of being the Father's Son (John 3:35).

This divine love, demonstrated and revealed at the cross, was righteous, holy and just (Romans 3:21–26). The words at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration link Psalm 2 with the servant who, in the Spirit, brings justice to the nations (Matthew 12:18; Luke 9:28–45; 2 Peter 1:16–18). This direct action of God as king brings the kingdom not only to Israel but to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 42 to 49; cf. Matthew 11 and 12).

The Father, through the death of his Son, gives humanity confidence *for* the day of judgement and confidence *on* the day of judgement (1 John 4:7–18). As we declare Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, we acknowledge Father, Son and Spirit. We receive the anointing of the same Spirit that Jesus received – of the Spirit that he pours out on his bride-church from Pentecost to Parousia (1 John 2:20–25). We receive Jesus' sonship and become children of God, members of the Father's family (1 John 3:1, Galatians 4:3–6).

### **The Father is king**

Jesus' ministry began with the proclamation of his Father's kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 6:32, 33). The centurion was praised for recognising the authority under which Jesus worked, though the Jews did not readily accept this (Matthew 8:5–13; John 8:12–20).

Jesus praised his Father when the kingdom was powerfully present with the disciples on their preaching tour (Luke 10:1–23). This is the kingdom where the Spirit brings justice to victory and where worldly systems are overcome (Matthew 12:18–28; John 16:31–33). It is this kingdom that the Father was pleased to give to his 'little flock', even though they did not understand what true greatness meant (Luke 12:29–34, 22:24–29).

The impact of Jesus' ministry was so powerful that he needed to withdraw to the desert (Matthew 12:15, 14:13 and John 6:15). Jesus' discussion concerning the crowd's perception of who he was emphasised his Father's kingdom and his Spirit-anointed messianic identity – and that the cross was central both to his identity and to his Father's kingdom (Matthew 16:13–28; Luke 9:18–27).

Jesus spoke of the victory and glory of the cross, even when detailing the sufferings involved (Luke 18:32; Mark 10:32–45; John 12:20–36, 17:1–5). Joseph and Nicodemus were left in little doubt concerning the nature of the kingdom (Mark 15:43; John 19:39). It was in the context of his crucifixion that Jesus told of his Father's mansion and of his kingdom not being of this world (John 14:1–4, 18:36–37). In accord with Psalm 2, Jesus explained much concerning the nature of the end times and what will happen in the interim age of the Spirit (Matthew 24 and 25; John 14 to 16). Crucified as king, his first and last words were to his Father. The repentant thief was in no doubt about who is king (Luke 23:34–46).

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Jesus taught the reign of God after his resurrection. As appointed king, he told of his presence with us in the Spirit as we give witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. He has authority from his Father who knows the times and seasons (Luke 24:25–27, 44–49; Acts 1:1–8; Matthew 28:16–20). This also all relates to the decree of Psalm 2 (Acts 13:33; Romans 1:1–6).

The message of Pentecost is clear: it is the day of the Spirit until the day of the Lord arrives and all Christ's enemies have been made his 'footstool'. The sovereign Son works through the outpoured Spirit to establish in history what he accomplished on the cross (Acts 2:17–36, 3:17–24). The Lord of history is crowned with glory and honour, he shares his joy with his Father, and he intercedes for us. The kingdom is coming to fullness (Hebrews 7:23–8:2, 9:24–28, 12:1–3; Romans 8:18–39).

As Jesus indicated in his parables, the Son of Man will come in his glory. His glory will be seen in the righteous who 'will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matthew 13:37–43, 24:31–46). He will fulfil Adam's mandate, and more! He will defeat the evil schemes of the nations and the demonic spiritual powers. Death and all humanity's enemies will be defeated. The whole universe will be transformed, and we will bear the image not of the man of dust but of Christ Jesus, the man of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:42–57).

The kingdoms of this world will belong to the Lord and his Messiah (Christ) for ever. With the Lamb are his 'called and chosen and faithful', those who 'have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony'. We will worship the Lord God Almighty along with the celestial elders because 'The nations raged, but your wrath has come' and 'The accuser ... has been thrown down'. The Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings; he rules 'with a rod of iron' (Revelation 2:26–29, 11:15–18, 12:10–12, 15:3, 4, 17:12–14, 19:11–18).

The drama of these days is discussed in the Thessalonian letters. Described as 'the church ... in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', their hearts are directed 'to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ'. They have been freed 'from the wrath that is coming' at the initiative of the Father whom they now serve, having been saved through his Messiah (1 Thessalonians 1:1, 9, 10, 3:13, 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:16, 3:5).

We await, then, the full revelation of the Father as king. This comes when Jesus as Messiah presents the renewed and glorified creation to his Father. Every person in all history will acknowledge him as his Father's king. The Father's family will celebrate the marriage of the bride and the Lamb. The nations will bring their glory into the New Jerusalem and Psalm 2 will be fulfilled (1 Corinthians 15:24–28; Philippians 2:6–11; Revelation 21, 22).

## Conclusion

Just as the ‘sinful woman’ anointed Jesus’ feet and fulfilled the command of Psalm 2 to ‘kiss [the Son’s] feet’, so too the tax collector cried out for God not to be angry with him but be merciful towards him, a sinner. They are part of a great multinational congregation caught up by the Spirit in the majestic love of the Father’s anointed Son (Luke 7:36–50, 18:9–14; cf. Habakkuk 3:2).

Why should anyone beat the drums of war against the Almighty? Especially since he is the God who casts ‘all our sins into the depths of the sea’. He is the LORD who is changing the angry beating of these war-drums into the peaceful beating of ‘swords into ploughshares, and … spears into pruning hooks’ (Micah 4:1–5, 7:18–20).

Jesus was turning swords into ploughshares by suffering and dying as he did. This divine action in the humanity of Jesus was God’s response to human rage and rebellion. Jesus’ response indicated his revolt against and revulsion of human and spiritual evil. His ‘rage’ and his ‘wrath’ against them was by being nothing like them – by being the messianic deliverer who *is* peace and who acts peacefully. The drumbeats of divine war *are* the rhythms of God’s serenity and salvation, the music of his mercy and the gentleness of his grace. The lilting serenades and symphonies of restorative lovingkindness heal broken hearts and troubled minds and ultimately bring recovery and refreshment for life in a renewed creation.

# The death and resurrection of Jesus

## The happening of the cross<sup>14</sup>

### Introduction

Jesus said more about his death and resurrection than is often realised. There are many direct references to the cross and numerous other passages have a fuller meaning in the light of his death and resurrection. The proportion of the Gospels given to the cross indicates the central importance of the atonement to the Gospel authors.

While some ambiguity exists in the Gospel record concerning the timing of the events relating to Jesus' death, these narratives contain many treasures. They explore Jesus' focus on those disadvantaged by the political and religious landscape. They record indications that Jesus and many of those with him understood his identity and ministry as fulfilling messianic prophecies. Language about the Son of Man and the servant-king illustrates this continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures.

Each of the Gospel writers, along with the authors of the other New Testament books, examines Jesus' life and death in different ways. This diversity provides evidence of the authenticity of their story, rather than contradicting it. While attempting to write a single narrative of the death of Jesus can easily blur and confuse these perspectives, it can also serve to enrich dialogue about the one series of events that these authors document.

Light shining out of darkness is a theme in John's Gospel and letters (John 1:1–14, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35–46, 1 John 1:1–10; cf. Revelation 21:23, 24, 22:5). Paul did not lose heart or give way to deviousness in sharing the gospel of the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:1ff). We have been given great treasures in our earthen vessels: 'precious and very great promises, so that through them [we] may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:1–4; cf. 1 Peter 1:7, 19, 2:4ff).

### An occupied cross and an empty tomb

The two disciples going to Emmaus were busy reflecting on Jesus' death. As they tried to grasp its meaning, 'Jesus himself came near and went with them'. Like them, we need him to open the Scriptures to us so that we can believe what the prophets wrote concerning his having 'to suffer these things and then enter his glory' (Luke 24:26).

The Gospels make it plain that the cross was no surprise to Jesus. It was indicated at his birth, baptism and transfiguration. He spoke of the sign of Jonah, of how he must

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<sup>14</sup> Edited from Don Priest, *Happening of the Cross, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications Inc., 1984).

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be killed and on the third day raised to life. He taught that the Son of Man had come to offer his life as a ransom for many. He also talked of laying down his life as the Good Shepherd, and of his being 'lifted up' (John 12:32).

Prior to Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, John recorded the raising of Lazarus and the High Priest's prophecy 'that it is better that one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed' (John 11:50). After this, Jesus cleansed the temple, dialogued with the Jewish leaders, and talked at length about the end times. John mentioned Jesus' discussion with some Greeks and the Father's strong voice from heaven.

While this was going on, the plot to crucify Jesus gathered momentum. The anointing of Jesus at Simon's house was the last straw for Judas, who arranged with the chief priests to betray Jesus. Yet, as Jesus pointed out, the aroma of that anointing goes wherever the gospel is preached. Mary was another woman who accurately sensed what was happening to the Messiah.

The accounts of the Passover meal tell of cautious preparation, of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (including Peter's), of Judas' exposure to the other disciples as a betrayer, of the dispute about who would be greatest, as well as details concerning the feast itself.

Included in these descriptions are Jesus' tender words with Peter, telling him that 'Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat' and how Jesus had prayed that his 'faith may not fail' (Luke 22:31, 32). The warning to Peter was extended to the others as Jesus told them they would all be scattered when the Shepherd was smitten.

John recorded Jesus' words of comfort to his disciples. Their theme centres on the necessity of the cross to the Father's will. He told them he must go to the Father in order that the Holy Spirit could comfort them and lead them from within. They also heard of their coming joy and of the defeat of the world-system.

This was no academic issue. Jesus sought his Father's strength when they arrived at Gethsemane and the disciples slept rather than prayed. His awareness of the coming cross overwhelmed him with sorrow. He was at the point of immediate death when the angel strengthened him to fulfil his Father's will that he lay down his life at the cross rather than having it taken from him in the Garden. He had explained 'I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father' (John 10:18). At this time Jesus prayed to his Father that eternal life be secured for those given him because his Father loved him 'before the foundation of the world' (John 17:24).

The disciples' time in the garden with their Master was suddenly interrupted by the small army accompanying Judas, who betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Peter's effort at slicing off the high priest servant's ear led Jesus to mention the ample number

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of angels he could call upon! However, fulfilling God's purposes took priority. Mark adds a small aside concerning the young man who had to flee naked to avoid being caught up in this arrest. He was not the only one to leave Jesus to the temple guard.

Amid physical and verbal abuse, Jesus gently reminded them of how he had taught openly in the temple. He told them that they could have arrested him there, and that those who heard him knew what he taught. Otherwise he remained silent until asked to confess whether he was the Messiah. Meanwhile Peter found the pressure too intense for his camouflage and left very distressed. Judas was filled with remorse for 'betraying innocent blood' and hanged himself after returning his reward (Matthew 27:4).

After facing Pilate and Herod (who decided to cease their mutual animosity), Jesus was offered to the assembled crowd as an alternative to the release of Barabbas. Although wanting to release Jesus, Pilate capitulated and handed him over for flogging and crucifixion. The customary release of a prisoner at the Passover feast had provided the situation for Jesus' civic trial. Not even the dream Pilate's wife endured led Pilate to follow his conscience.

While the women who lamented this outcome were among those warned of coming disaster, Simon from Cyrene found himself forced to carry Jesus' cross. How was he affected by Jesus' comment that 'For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry' (Luke 23:31)? Are his sons mentioned here because his family became known to the early church?

Golgotha means the place of the skull. It was there that the two criminals were crucified with one each side of the King of the Jews. Jesus refused the offered sedative, preferring to face his suffering fully conscious of what was happening to him.

It was usual for a sign describing the crime to be displayed. But the chief priests were annoyed by the notice Jesus was given and asked Pilate to alter it. Pilate's insistence that it read 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' must have reflected something of how he felt (John 19:19). We are told that many read the sign, which was written in the dominant languages of Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The event must have left its mark on many of the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover.

The soldiers who crucified Jesus took his clothes and, dividing them into shares, decided to cast lots to work out who would receive the seamless, fully woven undergarment. Both this and Jesus' refusal to take sedation were seen by the Gospel writers as fulfilling prophecies in their Hebrew Scriptures.

The warm response evoked by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was in stark contrast to the provocative abuse and derision hurled at him. The passers-by, the religious leaders, the soldiers and the robbers all joined in the deluge of insults. Their

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challenge that he come down from the cross was not very different to the temptation for him to jump off the temple pinnacle.

The abuse was broken by some significant interactions. Firstly, Jesus revealed his deep desire that his Father forgive them for acting so ignorantly. Shortly after this, one thief challenged the other one: ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ... but this man has done nothing wrong’ (Luke 23:40, 41). This repentant thief had only a short wait before he was living in Paradise with the king who knew his suffering so well.

Another intimate moment was shared as Jesus told his mother and John to regard themselves as mother and son.

What followed must have been awesome. Luke, that careful historian and doctor, told of three hours of darkness, during which the sun stopped shining. Although no physical explanation is obvious (since there can be no eclipse at a full moon),

Well might the sun in darkness hide,  
And shut his glories in,  
When Christ the mighty Maker died  
For man, the creature’s sin.<sup>15</sup>

However horrific the torment of physical pain, the agony that loving obedience and holy desire knew during those hours is evident in the loud cries that followed. By this time, the derisive din would most likely have died down and these cries must have pierced the atmosphere, summoning the attention of those who remained. His was no insane scream, only the assertive words of one who experienced the deepest moral and social suffering humanly possible.

After Jesus called out to God using the first words of Psalm 22, some of those nearby presumed he was calling Elijah and wondered if Elijah would come and save him. John recorded Jesus saying, ‘I am thirsty’. The wine vinegar in the sponge on the end of the stalk of hyssop that he then drank helped him declare two final statements ‘with a loud voice’: ‘It is finished’ and ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (John 19:28–30; Luke 23:44–46).

John wrote that Jesus’ final utterances were made knowing that ‘all was now finished’ (John 19:28). He breathed his last, aware of what had transpired and in intimate spiritual fellowship with his Father. His final acts of bowing his head and giving up his spirit were acts of accomplishment and not defeated resignation.

The impact of these final words must have been considerable. The centurion praised God and acknowledged the righteousness of this human Son of God. The crowds beat their breasts as they left, whilst his friends, including the women who

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<sup>15</sup> Watts, ‘Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed’.

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cared for him, watched ‘at a distance’ (Luke 23:49). We are also told of the temple curtain tearing from top to bottom, of an earthquake and of some resurrections.

To enable the bodies to be removed from the crosses before the sabbath began, the soldiers came to break the legs of those crucified. John recorded the testimony of someone who saw that Jesus was verified as being already dead. The flow of water and blood from the piercing of the spear removed the need to break any of his bones. It was exactly, John reminded his readers, as prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Joseph of Arimathea, assisted by Nicodemus, gained permission from Pilate to put Jesus’ body in his tomb with the dignity of Jewish burial customs. The women, after seeing this, went away to prepare spices and perfumes for the body.

The next day the Pharisees convinced Pilate to place guards at the tomb, but little did these soldiers expect the events that followed. Matthew reports that it was common knowledge that these men were bribed to remain silent concerning that first Easter Sunday.

The events of that day, when the women and the disciples saw the risen Lord, were not matters about which to be silent. Rather, as Cleopas and his friend learnt as they walked to Emmaus later that day, the resurrection was essential to the happening of the cross.

Just as the angel told them at the empty tomb, so Jesus ‘was opening the scriptures’ to them concerning his death and resurrection (Luke 24:32, cf. 32:45). Let us not be ‘foolish ... and slow of heart’, but let us, ‘clothed with power’ from the glorified Son, be his ‘witnesses ... to the ends of the earth’ (Luke 24:25, 26, 49; Acts 1:8).

As Jesus promised before his death, his Father’s promise of forgiven sins, of the outpoured Holy Spirit and of the present action of God’s kingdom testify to the happening of the cross today (and every day to the end of history). To have this testimony is ‘know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified’ and to take up our cross and follow him (1 Corinthians 2:2).

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### A summary

This summary provides a possible sequence of the major events immediately leading up to Jesus' death and following his resurrection.

The cross came as no surprise to Jesus.

'Lazarus come out!'

Caiaphas' indignant prophecy.

The triumphal entry of the righteous king.

Cleansing the 'house of prayer for all nations'.

The Father's voice:

His coming glory.

Talk of the end-times, and other matters.

The plot thickens.

The woman who understood.

Judas settles for 30 silver coins.

The Passover Meal:

Going home to Father.

Sending the Spirit.

Overcoming the world.

Gethsemane: Overwhelmed to the point of death.

Betrayal, arrest and trial. And the young lad.

Sifted as wheat, scattered as sheep.

Gentile endorsement. Pilate and Herod.

Led to Golgotha. Simon from Cyrene.

The crucified King:

The forgiving Father.

The coming Paradise.

Mother and Son.

Deep darkness. Forsaken, thirsty humanity.

'O death, where is your victory?'

Royal burial. Joseph and Nicodemus.

Messengers of resurrection:

Mary Magdalene,

Joanna and Salome,

James' mother ...

Peter and John.

The guards.

Emmaus:

Burning hearts and broken bread.

Witnesses of these things.

In Triune Community  
**For reflection and sharing**

1. How does the raising of Lazarus influence the events that follow?
2. What impact does the large gathering of people in Jerusalem have on the events leading to the cross?
3. Consider the responses of the leaders and the crowds to Jesus' teaching.
4. What can we learn from the references to Jesus' emotions prior to his crucifixion (Note John 11:11–18)?
5. Consider Jesus' death in the light of 1 Corinthians 15:50–58; Hebrews 5:7–10 and Acts 2:17–36, especially 24, 29, 31–33.
6. Trace the references to Nicodemus in John's Gospel (See John 3:1–19, 7:50, 19:39).
7. Reflect on the meaning and significance of each of the seven words Jesus said from the cross.
8. Summarise Jesus' teaching after His resurrection. How does this relate to his teaching to the disciples immediately prior to his death (See, for example, Luke 22:14–32 and John 14–16)?
9. Consider the awareness of the women followers of Jesus to his death and resurrection.
10. Compare Jesus' calls to be alert in Matthew 24:42; Mark 13:32–37; and Luke 21:34–36 with Matthew 26:40–46; Mark 14:32–42; and Luke 22:39–46.

In Triune Community  
A table for comparing references

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
<b>The raising of Lazarus</b>				
Jesus' return to Bethany.	—	—	—	11:1–44
Caiaphas' indignant prophecy. Jesus withdraws to Ephraim.	—	—	—	11:45–57
<b>The week before</b>				
(6 days before.)				
The anointings at Bethany.	26:6–13	14:3–9	—	12:1–11
(5 days before.)				
The triumphal entry; Jesus weeps over Jerusalem.	21:1–11	11:1–11	19:28–44	12:12–19
(4 or 5 days before.)				
Cleansing the 'house of prayer for all nations'. Returning to Bethany.	21:12–17	11:12–19	19:45–48	—
Jesus curses the fig tree.	21:18–22	11:20–25	—	—
(During this week)				
Jesus' authority questioned.	21:23–27	11:27–33	20:1–8	—
Parables: the two sons, the tenants, the wedding banquet.	21:28–22:14	12:1–12	20:9–19	—
Dialogue with the Pharisees & Sadducees: taxes to Caesar, marriage and resurrection, the greatest commandment, whose Son?	22:15–46	12:13–40	20:20–47	—
The widow's mite.	—	12:41–43	21:1–4	—
The seven woes.	23:1–39	—	—	—
Signs of the end of the age: 'Watch'. Nights on the Mount of Olives.	24:1–51	13:1–37	21:5–38	—
Parables: The ten virgins, the talents, the sheep, and the goats.	25:1–46	—	—	—
The plot thickens.	26:1–5	14:1–2	22:1–2	—
The Greeks see Jesus, the Voice from heaven, persistent unbelief.	—	—	—	12:20–50
(2 days before.)				
Judas agrees to betray Jesus.	26:14–16	14:10–11	22:3–6	13:2
<b>The last evening</b>				

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	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
Passover preparation. The Last Supper: washing the disciples' feet, Judas leaves, the disciples argue, the bread and wine.	26:17–30	14:12–26	22:7–30	13:1–30
Peter to be sifted as wheat; all to fall away.	26:31–35	14:27–31	22:31–38	13:31–38
The discourse with the disciples.	—	—	—	14:1–16:33
At Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives.	26:36–46	14:32–42	22:39–46	17:1–26
The arrest: Betrayed with a kiss, ample angels, the young man.	26:47–56	14:43–52	22:47–53	18:1–11
Before the Sanhedrin: false witnesses. The cock crows: Peter disowns his Master.	26:57–75	14:53–72	22:54–62	18:12–27
Judas' death.	27:1–10	—	—	—
Jesus before Pilate and Herod.	27:11–26	15:1–15	22:63–23:25	18:28–19:15
The soldiers mock Jesus.	27:27–31	15:16–20	—	—
<b>The crucifixion</b>				
To Golgotha: Daughters of Jerusalem, Simon from Cyrene.	27:32–33	15:21–22	23:26–31	19:16–17
The gall wine refused.	27:34	15:23	—	—
The sign: Pilate resists the pleas to change it.	27:37	15:25–26	23:38	19:18–22
Sharing the clothes.	27:35–36	15:24	23:34	19:23–24
Abuse: The passers-by.	27:39–40	15:29–30	23:35	—
Abuse: The chief priests, the lawyers, and the elders.	27:41–43	15:31–32	23:35	—
Abuse: The soldiers.	—	—	23:36–37	—
'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing'.	—	—	23:34	—
Two robbers abuse, one rebukes. With Jesus in Paradise.	27:38, 44	15:27–28, 32	23:32, 33, 39–43	—
Mother and Son.	—	—	—	19:25–27
Deep darkness.	27:45	15:33	23:44–45	—
'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'	27:46–47	15:34–36	—	—
'I thirst'.	—	—	—	19:28
The sponge of vinegar on the stalk of hyssop.	27:48–49	—	—	19:29
'It is finished'.	—	—	—	19:30

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	<b>Matthew</b>	<b>Mark</b>	<b>Luke</b>	<b>John</b>
‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’.	(27:50)	(15:37)	23:46	(19:30)
The temple curtain torn from top to bottom.	27:51	15:38	23:45	—
The earth quakes and some tombs open.	27:52–53	—	—	—
The Centurion believes.	27:54	15:39	23:47	—
The people leave, beating their breasts.	—	—	23:48	—
The women, and others, watch at a distance.	27:55–56	15:40–41	23:49	—
Broken legs. Pierced side.	—	—	—	19:31–37
<b>To the Father</b>				
Royal burial: Joseph and Nicodemus.	27:57–61	15:42–47	23:50–56	19:38–42
Guarding the tomb.	27:62–66	—	—	—
Messengers of the resurrection: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, James’ mother, other women, and Peter and John.	28:1–10	16:1–11	24:1–12	20:1–18
Keeping the guards quiet.	28:11–15	—	—	—
To Emmaus: burning hearts and broken bread.	—	16:12–13	24:13–35	—
The risen Lord: Eating the fish, His breath, Thomas, fishing for men, feeding His sheep.	—	16:14	24:36–49	20:19–21:25
The Ascension: ‘Witnesses ... to the ends of the earth’.	28:16–20	16:15–20	24:50–Acts 1:11	—

## Transfigured for the disfigured

### **Eyewitnesses of his majesty**

The transfiguration was preceded by Jesus asking his disciples who the crowds thought he was. Peter, in response, confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus then talked about his cross, of the futility of gaining the whole world, of coming in his and his Father's glory (with the holy angels), and of some not tasting death before they saw God's kingdom. Did seeing the kingdom point to Jesus' transfiguration, his cross (cf. Luke 23:38, 42, 43), his resurrection, Pentecost (Acts 1:6–8, 2:32–36), the church age (Acts 28:31), his second coming, or all of these?

Peter assured his readers that he, James and John were 'eyewitnesses of his majesty' (2 Peter 1:16, cf. Hebrews 1:3 'When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'). The appearance of Jesus' face changed (it 'shone like the sun') and his clothes were dazzlingly white ('as white as the light'). Those with him saw his glory (Matthew 17:1ff NIV; Mark 9:2ff; Luke 9:28ff; 2 Peter 1:16, 17; cf. Matthew 28:3).

### **With him in glory**

Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his departure (*exodus*) which he was about to accomplish (*pleroo*) at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31; cf. John 4:34, 5:36, 17:4, 19:30; also cf. Revelation 21:6 where the making of all things new in the coming of the new Jerusalem is said to be accomplished).

The cloud which formed (Luke 9:34) was not to take him but to send him. He had been speaking of coming in his and his Father's glory (Luke 9:26). This coming is referred to at his ascension, where the cloud received him, and where the disciples were told that he would come again in like manner (Acts 1:9–11). The cloud would have been a cloud of glory as, for example, in Matthew 24:30, Revelation 1:7 and Daniel 7:13. Moses and Elijah, along with Peter, James and John, were on hand to witness the commencement of this phase of his *exodus*. John 8:34 indicates that Jesus knew where he came from and where he was going. The transfiguration marked a change in Jesus' emphasis from his coming from the Father to his returning to the Father.

No premature ascension was on the agenda of Jesus, Moses and Elijah: there would be no glory without wounds (cf. Thomas; John 20:24–29), Jesus was to go to a place where none of those present could go. The LORD buried Moses after showing him the promised land to which he had been denied entry after smiting the rock twice (Numbers 20:12, 1 Corinthians 10:1–5). Elijah went to Mt. Horeb (Sinai) after running for his life. He pleaded 'with God against Israel' (1 Kings 19, Romans 11:1–4). Peter denied Jesus after promising to die with him. Jesus

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predicted that all his disciples, including James and John, would desert him (Matthew 26:31–35, Luke 22:31–34).

These shortcomings should be seen in their contexts (cf. Deuteronomy 34:10–12 and Jude 9; Matthew 11:11–14; Galatians 1:18, 2:9).

### Ready for those who love God

God's word will 'accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it'; it does not return to him empty (Isaiah 55:11). The prophetic word was 'more fully confirmed' by the voice from heaven (2 Peter 1:17–19, cf. his baptism (Matthew 3:17) and death (John 12:28)). Peter's letters are a sample of what Peter told his hearers, and the transfiguration was a significant part of that message (2 Peter 1:12–14). Peter gave us a window into the nature of Jesus' discourse with Moses and Elijah; what they shared was to be his gospel. The rulers of this age were ignorant of God's plan when they 'crucified the Lord of glory'. The three shared what Paul later wrote about concerning what 'God has prepared for those who love him'. No wonder Jesus scorned the shame of the cross (1 Corinthians 2:1–16, Hebrews 12:3).

Peter's desire to build tabernacles was a predictable though at best premature response given that Moses met with God in the Tent of Meeting with God's presence and glory in and above that tabernacle. Yet this tent was but a sign of what was to come (Exodus 25:40; Hebrews 8:1–10:39, 12:18–24, 13:14), as was the glory that attended the temple (2 Chronicles 5 to 7, Isaiah 6:1–11, Ezekiel 43:1–11, Haggai, Zechariah 2 to 4, cf. Ezekiel 8 to 10).

Stephen, in response to being accused of blasphemy against Moses and God, spoke at length about God's call of Moses, the Exodus and the tabernacle. In referring the Sanhedrin to Moses and Jesus, he reminded them that 'you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit' and looked towards the final goal of God in history (Acts 6:1–8:1; cf. Isaiah 65:17–25; Revelation 21:1–4). We, whose citizenship is in heaven, are being transformed (conformed) into the likeness of Christ's glorious body (2 Corinthians 3:7–18; Philippians 3:17–21).

The unbelieving disciples were later confronted by the greatness of God when Jesus healed a boy and shared some further words concerning the cross. Jesus had told them to be quiet about the transfiguration until after his death. They asked why they should do this if Elijah was to come first (i.e. to proclaim Messiah). Jesus' response indicated that Elijah had come and was killed, even as Jesus was going to die, but that Elijah would come 'and restore all things' (Matthew 17:11). This seems to refer to another Elijah coming before the second coming of Jesus. Elijah was on the disciples' minds at that time because Elijah was one of the suggestions put forward when Jesus asked who the crowds thought he was, prior to Peter's confession and Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 16:14).

## **Exalted, lifted up and very high**

We may misinterpret Jesus' death, not grasping that it was essential to him being 'exalted and lifted up, and ... very high' (Isaiah 52:13). His *exodus* would not be completed alone (cf. Moses' out of Egypt and the LORD's message to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:18). He brings God's family to glory, as Christian services of the Lord's Supper and Baptism declare. Adoption and atonement are both aspects of one action. God is Father-Redeemer from eternity (Isaiah 52:13–55:12, 63:16; Hebrews 2:9–16; 1 Corinthians 10:1–5, 11:23–26, 12:13). Christ declares and establishes this reality in history to 'the ends of the earth' (Psalm 2; Matthew 28:16–19; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Revelation 11:15).

'He was transfigured to be disfigured so that we who are disfigured would be transfigured'.<sup>16</sup> We are in harmony with him as we care for other people: 'death is at work in us, but life in you' (2 Corinthians 4:1–18). We reflect his majesty in our ministries; there is no other message or life for us (2 Peter 1:12–15; Galatians 6:11–18; Ephesians 6:19–20; Philippians 1:12ff; 1 Thessalonians 1:4–2:12; 1 Timothy 4:16–18; 1 John 3:16). This truth will be fully apparent in the new creation (1 John 3:1–3; Revelation 12:10–12, 22:1–6).

## **Additional note on Moses and Elijah**

### ***Moses***

After the Israelites made the golden calf, God said he would no longer go with them as they went to the promised land. Moses, meeting with God in the Tent, where God spoke with him 'as one speaks with his friend', asked God who would go with him (Exodus 33:11). God relented and indicated that his presence would go with Moses and the people because he was pleased with him. Moses then asked to see God's glory as an affirmation of this promise. In response, God said that he would show Moses his goodness, proclaim his name and affirm his sovereignty in choosing where he would be merciful and compassionate. Moses was directed to meet God alone (and with two new stone tablets) on Mt. Sinai. It was on the mountain, in the cleft of the rock, that Moses saw the LORD's glory and heard the LORD's proclamation (Exodus 34:6–8). Moses' prayer of response immediately afterwards urged the LORD to go with his people, forgiving them and adopting them as his inheritance. God made a covenant with them concerning the commandments and major feasts: Unleavened Bread (Passover), Weeks (Pentecost) and Ingathering (Tabernacles). When Moses came down from the mountain his face shone. As a result, he veiled his face, except when with the LORD.

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<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Person and Work of Christ, The* (Blackwood, South Australia: New Creation Publications, 1983, 2007), 34. *Everlasting Presence, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1990), 52.

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After being shown the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo, Moses died alone and was buried by the LORD in an unknown location. Although he had been denied entry to the Promised land because of his anger in striking the rock twice at Meribah, the testimony in Deuteronomy is that

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:10–12).

Moses had prophesied of a greater prophet (Deuteronomy 18:14–21).

In 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 Paul contrasted the fading glory of this covenant with the permanent glory of the new covenant. In Christ, the ‘veil’ that hides God’s glory is removed when anyone repents, with those ‘in Christ’ then reflecting his glory. This glory comes to us through the Lord Spirit and transforms us into Christ’s image ‘from one degree of glory to another’.

Paul compared two covenants when contrasting Hagar with Sarah, and the Jerusalem above with that on earth (Galatians 4:21–31; see also Acts 13:39 and Romans 10:5). John wrote that the law was given through Moses, and grace and truth through Jesus Christ. The Word-become-flesh revealed the Father’s glory as his grace and truth, so making God known to us through the fullness of his grace (John 1:14–18).

This contrast between Moses and Christ occurs in Jesus’ discussions about the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14), divorce (Matthew 19:7, 8), the resurrection (Luke 20:28, 37), bread from heaven (John 6:32), and healing on the sabbath (John 7:32–24). The blind man queried the Pharisees’ assessment that God had not spoken to Jesus as well as Moses (John 9:28). Moses’ prophecy of a prophet like himself coming who must be obeyed is also seen to be fulfilled (John 5:45–47 cf. Acts 3:22).

Jesus reinforced and fulfilled Moses’ ministry (Matthew 5:17, 23:2). In Revelation, the song of salvation of the people of God is called ‘the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb’ (Revelation 15:1–4).

The writer of Hebrews includes Moses in the roll call of faith, describing how Moses chose to be ill-treated with the people of God rather than enjoy sin’s transient pleasures: ‘He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward’ (Hebrews 11:24–28). The same epistle has much to say of why ‘Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself’. The writer indicated that Christ ‘was faithful over God’s house as a son’ (Hebrews 3:2, 3, 16; 7:14; 9:19; 10:28; 12:21).

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The early church was acutely aware of the need to see Jesus' link with Moses very clearly and sensitively (Acts 15:1–21, 21:21).

### *Elijah*

After calling down fire upon the flooded altar at Mt. Carmel, Elijah believed he was the only prophet of God left and fled from Jezebel to Mt. Horeb (Sinai), with some angelic encouragement along the way. It was there that the LORD passed by after a gale, fire and an earthquake. The LORD then spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper. Elijah was given his next assignment with the assurance that he was not alone; there were seven thousand other faithful Israelites.

Elisha later inherited Elijah's mantle and refused to let Elijah be separated from him until a chariot of fire with horses of fire came in between them to carry Elijah to heaven (2 Kings 2:1–18).

Malachi prophesied that the day of the LORD is coming for judgement on the arrogant and evil, and for the healing of those who reverence God's name. He urged his readers to remember the law Moses received and look for a coming Elijah (Malachi 4:1–6). Later, Jesus declared John the Baptist as 'the Elijah who is to come' and quoted Malachi 3:1 concerning God's messenger who will prepare his way (Matthew 11:1–19). This correlates with Isaiah 40:5 where we are told that 'the glory of the LORD shall be revealed'.

Jesus referred to Elijah in his sermon at Nazareth, declaring to the amazement of those listening that the Spirit was on him to 'proclaim the year of the LORD's favour', so fulfilling Isaiah 61:1ff (Luke 4:14–30). He reminded them that prophets are not accepted in their home towns, citing Elijah's ministry to a widow in Zarephath and Elisha's healing of Naaman as examples.

Some of those present at Jesus' crucifixion thought his cry of abandonment was a call for Elijah (Matthew 27:45–49). One wonders what would have happened if it had been! It has been speculated that the two men present at the tomb and the two who appeared at Jesus' ascension were not angels but Elijah and Moses. We are reminded, more importantly, that Elijah was a righteous man whose prayers were 'powerful and effective' (James 5:16–18).

### *Moses and Elijah*

We have already looked at Malachi's prophecy concerning Moses and Elijah. These two are linked in other places, as well as by the terms 'the law [and/or] the prophets' (Matthew 5:17, 7:12, 22:40; Luke 16:29, 31, 24:27, 44; John 1:45; Acts 24:14, 26:22, 28:23; Romans 3:21). In Revelation 11 we read of two witnesses, who after being martyred, come to life and ascend to heaven in a cloud in response to a heavenly call. This is followed by an earthquake and great glory being given to God. Some think that these witnesses are Moses and Elijah; others that they represent the faithful two-sevenths of the sevenfold church of chapters 2 and 3. It is this faithful remnant that helps provide this ongoing witness to Jesus Christ.

## The death of disobedience in the death of Christ

### Turning disobedient hearts to the wisdom of the righteous

The angel of the Lord calmed Zechariah when bringing an answer to his prayer for a son. This son, John the Baptist, would be ‘great in the sight of the Lord’ in preparing them for the coming Messiah. John would minister in the power of the Holy Spirit, even as Elijah had, and the disobedient would turn ‘to the wisdom of the righteous’ and be reconciled to God and each other (Luke 1:13–17; cf. Malachi 3:1–4:6; Isaiah 40:1ff; Nehemiah 9:29; Daniel 9:11; Proverbs 3:5, 6).

What does it take to change a disobedient person into an obedient one? A better question might be ‘What changes disobedient people into righteous ones?’ or even ‘What causes us to turn from disobedience and embrace wisdom?’.<sup>17</sup> From the first sin in Eden, humanity has always had the word of the LORD to the serpent that evil would not prevail: ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel’ (Genesis 3:15). Jacob later prophesied of one coming who would achieve obedience not simply for Israel, but for all nations (Genesis 49:10). Israel, with these and other promises, including those God gave through Moses, and despite the exhortations in Deuteronomy, often failed abysmally (Exodus 24:1–7; Deuteronomy 4:1–13; 18, 26:17–30:20; Joshua 1:1ff, 23:1–24:28). The prophets, including Isaiah, looked to a new messianic reign rather than relying on the people to have a change of heart (e.g. Isaiah 1:1–2:4; cf. Acts 5:17ff, 7:1ff).

Through the preaching of the apostles, ‘the word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith’, and Saul of Tarsus obeyed the heavenly vision (Acts 6:7; Acts 26:9).

The book of Hebrews confronts its readers about disobedience (e.g. Hebrews 2:1–4, 3:7–4:13, 6:1–20, 8:1–13, 10:1–39). This confrontation centres on an understanding that one person learnt obedience through his own sufferings, and that, as high priest, his sufferings were an effective sacrifice for disobedience (Hebrews 2:5–18, 4:14–5:10, 7:1–18, 9:1–28, 12:1–29).

### True obedience involves hearing and believing

Many Scriptures link obedience to *hearing and listening* and *believing and being persuaded* (e.g. Genesis 3:1ff, 12:1–4, 15:1–6, 26:1–5; Hebrews 11:8). Hearing and believing both relate to God’s promises and covenant purposes for his people and for his creation. They relate to living in his light and love. To know God as Father and the truth concerning his saving action in Jesus is to obey his

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Don Priest, *Learning to Love Wisdom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2019).

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commands. Those who know the love of God will reach its goal: they will walk as Jesus did, not as mere clones or copies, not only as mentored or modelled, but by living in the liberty of love, in the light of the triune God's life, fellowship and communion. They will receive what they request concerning this way of living because they know God's will and obey him with joy, and so ask about these things according to his will in boldness and faith. This is true abiding (1 John 2:1–6, 3:19–22, 5:1–5)!

Obedience is not an optional extra. It is living in the fullness of the triune revelation and testimony given from the Father, in the Spirit, in and through his Messiah-Son. Terrible turmoil and tragedy eventuate outside of this life: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath' (John 3:36).

Paul, after his conversion (Acts 9:1ff, 26:9ff; 1 Timothy 1:12ff), proclaimed the rich grace, mercy and love of God, who,

even when we were dead through our trespasses made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–7).

Paul saw sin as horrific and required God's grace and mercy if it was to be dealt with completely. To do so involved breaking the tyranny of 'the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient' (Ephesians 2:2, cf. 5:1–20; Colossians 3:1–11; Titus 3:3–11). Paul's use of the word 'once' (cf. Ephesians 2:2, 3, 13, 5:8; Colossians 1:21, 3:7; Titus 3:3) indicates that, for him, something had structurally changed. 1 Timothy 1 warns of the perils of straying from the truth, as well as of God's mercy and patience to Paul, while 2 Timothy 3 describes the contest in which we live and how we are to respond.

### **The obedience of faith**

The Christians living in Rome were under political subjection to the Caesars and their decrees. Paul wrote to them of a greater Lord who has the obedience of the nations in mind (Romans 1:5, 15:18, 16:26, cf. Romans 2:1–11)!

Paul's apostolic calling meant being set apart for the promised gospel of God concerning his Son, who was 'descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead'. Through him Paul's charter was 'to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name' (Romans 1:1–7). Paul enlarged on this theme when writing about his calling (Romans 15:13–29). His final benediction was consistent with the goal he described (Romans 16:25–28).

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Our core crisis requires us being released from disobedience to become ‘slaves to righteousness for sanctification’ and to receive eternal life as a gift of God freely given in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:16–23). This divine program to bring about the obedience of the nations is a great mystery: ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!’ (Romans 9:1–11, especially 10:14–21, 11:25–31).

### One man’s obedience

Peter similarly described his readers as having ‘been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’. Their obedience as the Father’s children was in having purified their souls by their ‘obedience to the truth’ so that they had ‘genuine mutual love’ (1 Peter 1:2, 14, 22, cf. 3:20, 4:17).

Christ’s engagement with human sin was complete – not as a sinner, but as the righteous for the unrighteous in order that we might ‘live for righteousness’:

Christ also suffered for you ... He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:21–25).

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).

Releasing humanity from disobedience required the Son of God to be obedient and to act with humility. These realities achieve the same outcome only after they impact our proud, unbelieving hearts. It is Christ’s obedient humility that is without parallel anywhere else in all humanity. It is his humble obedience that is the substance of his lordship over humanity and which forms the reason for his exaltation by the Father (Philippians 2:1–13; cf. Hebrews 5:5–10).

### A benediction and exhortation

Paul contrasted Adam’s disobedience in Eden, the garden of God, with Christ’s obedience at Golgotha, the place of the skull and a desert of death. The death of Christ is the death of disobedience. Christ’s righteousness now rules in our hearts as God’s gift of grace. The death of disobedience brings the life of obedience which Paul described in Romans 5 to 8 (cf. Romans 12ff; Ephesians 4 to 6, and Colossians 3 and 4).

The exhortations in the first letter of John are relevant for those who are dead to disobedience and alive in Christ. To live in loving obedience to his commands is never burdensome (1 John 2:12–17, 5:1–5).

### Additional note on Romans 5:12–21

*The death of disobedience in the death of Christ* is explored in Romans 5:12–21 where Paul's parallel between Adam and Christ contrasted Adam's sin with Christ's righteousness. His unfinished sentence in verse 12, interrupted with verses 13 and 14, could be completed as follows:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned, so righteousness came into the world through one man, and life came through righteousness, and so life spread to all who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

Paul may have interrupted his statement in verse 12 because he wanted to compare the impact of divine law and judgement with that of divine grace and free gift. Law, judgement, free gift and grace all participate in God's plan to bring humanity and creation to the liberty appropriate for God's children (cf. Romans 8). Law and judgement are not opposites to grace and giving. God meets obedience and disobedience with one intention, but the impact of his encounter depends on the disposition of those involved.

Paul's reference to sin and death in verse 12 links back to Genesis 2:17 and 3:19. Paul indicated in verses 13 and 14 that while sin and death affect all humanity, Adam's sin was unique as it related to him as 'a type of the one who was to come'. Paul emphasised the consequences of one man's action in every verse from verse 15 to verse 19. For Paul, Adam's sin connects with everyone's sin while Christ's righteousness is everyone's righteousness (i.e. 'all' as in 'those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness').

Paul's key thought in verses 13 and 14 is that 'death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses'. The sin of those after Adam was different to Adam's sin, as Adam was without sin when he received the command about the tree and its fruit. Paul also implied that the law of Moses altered things for humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Paul emphasised parallels between Adam's trespass and Christ's free gift in verses 15 to 19. Verse 15 contrasts the effect of Adam's trespass with the impact of God's grace freely given in and through Christ. Verse 16 focuses on condemnation and justification rather than on death and life. Verse 17 stresses the dominion or reign of death through Adam and the 'grace and the free gift of righteousness' through

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<sup>18</sup> The source of this paraphrase is unknown. These notes were partially based on John Murray, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 178ff.

<sup>19</sup> Paul was not saying there was no law before Moses, nor that the sins committed were not serious. There was divine law, but not as at Sinai and not as in Eden. Paul's thesis is based on the consequences of Adam's sin for all humanity, before and after Sinai.

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Jesus Christ. This verse, like verse 15, describes the certainty and abundance of grace and gift by the phrase ‘much more surely’.

Paul summarises his thoughts in verses 18 to 21. Verse 18, like verse 16, concentrates on condemnation and justification, but completes the consequences of Christ’s righteousness as being ‘justification and life for all’. The parallel emphasis involves one action by one person: Adam’s ‘trespass’ and Christ’s ‘act of righteousness’.

Verse 19 expands and explains verse 18 in terms of the disobedience of Adam and the obedience of Christ. While all in Adam are sinners by action, none of those in Christ have inherent righteousness. Just as Adam’s sin affected everyone, so Christ’s righteousness brings grace to all who believe.

In verses 20 and 21, the multiplying of sins that results from the giving of the law correlates with the sin of Adam in the face of the original command given by God. Through this aspect of the law, Paul points to the service the law gives in flushing sin into the open so that the principle he established concerning Adam and Christ can have its full application. However terrible the multiplication of sin, the super-abundance of grace is even more magnificent. Death is defeated by grace and its dominion is destroyed. Grace reigns through ‘justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord’.

There can be little doubt that Christ’s obedience relates to his death on the cross (Romans 3:21–26; cf. Philippians 2:6, 7). Living consistently in the fullness of God’s grace and mercy is a wonderful calling in which all praise is for God’s glorious plan and purpose which together work for good according to his own wisdom and knowledge (Romans 8:28, 11:33–36).

## Living in the resurrection

### Confidence in Christ or confidence in the flesh

The evil workers in Philippians 3:1–4 are those who, in Christ’s name, worship in, by, or from their own spirits, boasting in and of themselves with complete confidence in their own humanity. Paul’s metaphor in verse 2 reverses one that was used against Gentile believers. Paul was not simply warning about who he was before his conversion. He had in mind those who were operating within the household of God as ministers of Christ but acting like he was before he met Jesus on the Damascus road. He wanted the Philippians to beware – to be wary, to be aware – of such people and practices.

### Self-righteousness or God’s righteousness by faith in Christ

In Philippians 3:7–9 Paul contrasted self-trust and being found in Christ:

Verse 7: Yet whatever *gains I had*, these I have come to regard as *loss because of Christ*.

Verse 8a: More than that, I regard *everything as loss* because of the surpassing value of *knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*.

Verse 8b, 9: For his sake I have *suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish*, in order that *I may gain Christ and be found in him*, ...

Verse 9: *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law*, but one [*a righteousness*] *that comes through faith in Christ*, the righteousness from God based on faith (italics added).

He developed his thought that building one’s own empire to attain righteousness is worthless because true righteousness comes by faith in Christ – by *knowing Christ Jesus as one’s own Lord*. In repeating this theme, Paul’s emphasis becomes stronger. Losing all things by counting them as rubbish brought suffering to him, but not even this difficulty was comparable to gaining Christ and being ‘found in him’ (Philippians 3:9).

This identification with Christ links back to verse three where Paul described himself as one who worships in the Spirit of God and boasts in Christ Jesus. The contrast with ‘those who mutilate the flesh’ as they rely upon it and trust in it is explained as being between self-righteousness (cf. verse 6) and ‘the righteousness from God based on faith [in Christ]’ (Philippians 3:9).

### Arriving at the resurrection from the dead

Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:9–10 may be considered in these sections:

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I want to know Christ  
and  
the power of his resurrection and sharing of his sufferings  
by  
becoming like him in his death,  
if  
somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul connected four thoughts together before declaring his hope that he would be raised from the dead. His comment indicates his recognition that the task of resurrection was not yet complete: ‘to the effect that I may be raised from the dead’. The matter was in God’s hands and not in his own (cf. Philippians 1:6). The ‘somehow’ connects to the previous phrase: ‘by becoming like him in his death’. Paul’s thought is not primarily physical but ethical; he had spent the previous verses discussing two kinds of righteousness. The first half of chapter two explores what this meant for Christ, and here he stated what it means for God’s people.

The word ‘and’ in verse ten reveals extra depths of meaning. It does not indicate separate categories. He wanted to know Christ, and this meant knowing him in ‘the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings’. These two statements are tightly connected. Christ’s resurrection power and participating in Christ’s sufferings are both part of the one bundle.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing Christ is defined in terms of his resurrection and sufferings. These are linked with faith in God for righteousness through Christ, and his final destiny in being with him forever. Christ’s presence with him was consistent with Christ’s own earthly humanity. Indeed, Paul may well be indicating that Christ, now raised, is with his people in their sufferings, so conforming us to his death, and thus bringing us to resurrection in him.

The context for Paul’s statement of ‘the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings’ is ‘I want to know Christ … by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain [i.e. arrive at, reach] the resurrection from the dead’. To know Christ is to become like him in both his death and resurrection (cf. Philippians 2:5–11), so leading to Christ’s goal for his people.

This emphasis on Christ’s crucifixion is strong:

I want to know Christ … by becoming like him in his death.  
I want … the power of his resurrection … by becoming like him in his death.  
I want … the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.

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<sup>20</sup> Paul did not write ‘participating in the fruits or benefits of Christ’s sufferings’.

### **The end of perfectionism and triumphalism**

In Philippians 3:12–16 Paul emphasised that true maturity is living in these things. They are not a starting point from which to move on to other things. They are the whole journey, from start until finish, and those who press on, press further into the truths Paul explored in verses 7 to 11. The pressing on of which Paul wrote calls for humility of the kind already mentioned in chapter 2. This view of maturity links with Paul’s warning in verse 2 about false teachers. He remembered his own story, and wanted, ‘somehow’, to ‘press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 3:14).

### **Enemies of the cross of Christ or citizens of heaven**

In Philippians 3:17–21 Paul returned to his initial theme in verse 2. He warned of those doomed for glorying in their shame, and of being consumed with earthly treasures and indulgences. He had in mind the fruits of self-righteousness and false shepherds. True citizens of heaven are friends of the cross of Christ; they share ‘in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ (Philippians 3:10). They only expect resurrection power in this life and bodily resurrection in the next ‘by becoming like him in his death’.

All this is the work of Christ in the people of God – the Christ Paul so keenly wanted to know. His, and our Saviour, Jesus Christ, will not only keep us through this life, but in so doing ‘will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself’ (Philippians 3:21).

### **Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ**

Paul, throughout this epistle, emphasised living consistently with Christ and so with the heavenly citizenship that he was expecting to come from heaven with Jesus’ return (Philippians 1:27, 3:20). He wanted them to be ‘pure and blameless having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God’ (Philippians 1:10, 11). He rejected proclamation of Christ out of envy and rivalry or from selfish ambition, for this would be inconsistent with Christ’s goodwill and love (Philippians 1:15–17). Because of his proclamation of Christ, he asked them to

be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:1–4).

This confidence in Christ’s resurrection lordship impacts profoundly in this world. They were to be ‘blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world’ (Philippians 2:15). God is faithful, even beyond death. This faithfulness

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impacts us richly by causing us to forget past failures and struggles as reasons for calling ourselves righteous (or unrighteous) and by leading us to ‘press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 3:14). This pressing on brings ongoing joy in the Lord (Philippians 4:5–9).

Knowing Christ ‘and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death’ impacts on all of life. Knowing Christ has radical implications for us as God’s people together and as persons before him, including on our ecclesiasticism, ethics and evangelism, and makes us people of the resurrection:

Father of Heaven, and by him, by whom  
It, and us for it, and all else, for us  
Thou madest, and govern’st ever, come  
And re-create me, now grown ruinous  
My heart is by dejection, clay,  
And by self-murder, red.  
From this red earth, O Father, purge away  
All the vicious tinctures, that new fashioned  
I may rise up from death, before I’m dead.<sup>21</sup>

### Additional note on Peter’s crisis

After concluding the Last Supper with a hymn, the disciples left for the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:31–35). Jesus’ description of his death and resurrection indicates that they would desert him ‘because of me’. They would abandon him in his hours of abandonment. He would be struck; they would be scattered. This refers to Jesus’ loud cry from the cross, quoting Psalm 22:1.

Jesus was doing his Father’s will in his suffering. He was never more doing his Father’s will than when ‘saving his people from their sins’ (Matthew 1:21). In the mystery of his death he was one with his Father as his Son in these desolate hours of human forsakenness before God.

The scattering of the disciples is best seen in this light. Their scattering as they failed to trust him, as they deserted him in attempting self-preservation, identified them with him. He bore their scattering in his forsakenness. He shared separation with them – he without sin, longing to be with his God; they in fear, terrorised by what was happening to him. In this strange sense they remained together, conscious of one event – his death, just as he prophesied.

Peter’s denial that he would deny his Lord was evidence of his need of his Lord, and of his saving death. Only in this way would he no longer need to be heroic.

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<sup>21</sup> From Donne, ‘A Litany’. ‘The Father’.

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Only in this way could he trust his Lord as Saviour; and not only as his Saviour, but as Saviour of the world.

The certainty of this connection between the Shepherd being struck and the sheep scattered underlined Jesus' confidence in their meeting after he was raised. Just as Jesus' first statement united himself with them in separation and bewilderment, so his second statement joined them in fellowship and purpose. They would first be apart, yet together; they would later be together, yet apart.

Like Peter, we can learn that we, too, need his death and resurrection, and that all else comes in this divine gift – not apart from it, and certainly not beyond it. We do well to answer Jesus' earlier question to his disciples: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Matthew 16:15). Who is Jesus? Who is his Father? Who is the Holy Spirit? What are they doing in Jesus' incarnation, earthly life, death, resurrection, ascension and coming? What is their gospel? What is the nature of their church, their community, and what is its mission? And do we know and understand this gospel, this church, this mission only as they are consistent with the God whom we know through Jesus Christ as Lord?

## The world on the cross

### The whole world was there to crucify him

We can imagine how the crucifixion of Jesus affected each of those who were there – the thieves, the soldiers, the religious leaders, the disciples and friends, and the crowd. It is also helpful to consider what it meant for Jesus to be there. He had said that when he was ‘lifted up from the earth’ that he would ‘draw all people’ to himself (John 12:32). He had said that he was doing what his Father had commanded him to do ‘so that the world may know that I love the Father’ (John 14:31). Jesus explained that the Holy Spirit would declare to God’s people what he was to receive from the Father (John 16:13–15). He knew the Father was with him and loved him ‘because I lay down my life in order to take it up again’ (John 10:17, 16:32, 33).

The world is represented by those present, not only by their being spectators, but as participants in what happened. For example, the two thieves seem to speak for all humanity: both blasphemed and one repented (Luke 23:32–43; cf. Matthew 27:44). As Jesus heard the penitent thief, he knew the witness of the Father and the Spirit to him that he was crucified for all humanity. As the thief spoke, Jesus knew that his crucifixion opened entry into the kingdom of God and enabled deliverance from the dominion of darkness (cf. Colossians 1:13). Jesus knew that, in and through his death, he was declaring his Father to God’s family, that he was there for and with those whom his Father had given him (Hebrews 2:10–13). The other bandit’s angry tirades and absence of belief are reminders of the terror into which humanity descends in those seasons when any of us reject God’s grace and mercy.

Did Jesus hear in the repentant criminal’s cry the coming fulfilment of the Father’s promise to him concerning the cross and the ‘freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21)? Did the Spirit of eternal communion and community witness to him concerning the holy and loving purposes of the triune God that we come to share in their fellowship (2 Peter 1:4; Ephesians 1:14; Romans 8:14)? Is Jesus’ death and resurrection a fulfilment of the saying that bread sent out upon the waters returns after many days (Ecclesiastes 11:1)?

Exploring these and other questions can help us understand something of what Jesus said about his own crucifixion, and more of what it means for the whole world to have been at Calvary. We can see further insights from those involved. We can observe essential etchings of what emerges in human history from his death, resurrection and ascension in these events.

### The precious patience of God and the perishing panic of evil

In a dramatic passage, Isaiah wrote of God’s people making a ‘covenant with death’ and of God responding by saying:

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See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: ‘One who trusts will not panic’ (Isaiah 28:15, 16).

Peter reminded his readers about not panicking or being dismayed: ‘You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish’ (1 Peter 1:18, 19). Peter wanted them to know that because Jesus is the cornerstone of the true temple, Jesus is *precious* to those who believe. The people of God, and those who believe in him, ‘will not [ultimately] be put to shame’ (1 Peter 2:4–6).

God’s people have ‘received a faith as *precious* as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ’. We, by and in God’s calling, have been given ‘his *precious* and very great promises, so that through them [we] may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:1–4, italics added). This calling comes from God’s power, glory and goodness! In his second letter, Peter added that God’s people can ‘regard the patience of our Lord as salvation’ (2 Peter 3:15). Paul developed a similar theme when he warned against despising ‘the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience’. Paul asked his readers whether they realised ‘that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance’ (Romans 2:4).

In Jesus’ account of the battle between a strong man and a stronger than strong man, God’s patience as Jesus faced evil is evident (Luke 11:21–22; Matthew 12:29). Yet it is this very rage and fury of evil that spells its ultimate doom (cf. Revelation 12:12). Its panic as it desperately tried to defeat the crucified Son of God is the signature of its own defeat. Jesus, in all his anguish, sorrow, pain and grief, patiently suffered as the just for the unjust to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:17, 18, cf. 2:22–24).

The power of the world was broken in this way at the cross (Galatians 1:4, 6:14, cf. Hebrews 2:14, 15; Colossians 2:13, 14). Christ’s crucifixion defeated worldly wisdom and showed its ignorance of divine truth (1 Corinthians 1:21ff). All the pain, shame, sorrow, guilt and turmoil wrought by the serpent in the garden through those early parents and in humanity since then is borne patiently and lovingly by Christ. This precious patience of God in Christ overcame the perishing panic of evil and secured and opened Paradise for the people of God.

### **The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world**

What is it to be crucified to the world and for the new creation to be ‘everything’? What is it for the world to be ‘crucified to me’ (Galatians 6:14, 15)? What is it to ‘survey the wondrous cross’?

His dying crimson like a robe,  
Spreads o’er His body on the Tree;

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Then am I dead to all the globe,  
And all the globe is dead to me.<sup>22</sup>

Paul wrote of living by and in the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved him (Galatians 2:19, 20). Elsewhere Paul testified that he saw the faithfulness of Christ as foundational to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7–14).

If the world is crucified to us, and we, in Christ, see the world as crucified, then we will know that the old has passed away and the new has arrived (2 Corinthians 5:17). Worldliness is no longer seductive. It is vacuous, inane, futile and aimless. Its ‘doom is sure’, along with its patterns of leadership.<sup>23</sup> The biblical pictures of Babylon, Egypt and Rome show that the gaudy harlot holds no authentic attraction. These truths are only known by the grace of God in Christ, by his faithfulness in establishing the kingdom of God and resisting and defeating the Devil’s temptations and assaults.

The world is crucified to us exactly when we are ‘crucified to the world’, when we are dead to its desires, its indulgences, passions and pleasures (cf. Romans 6:1ff, Colossians 1:21ff). The inevitable result is that the world is surprised at us and then angry with us for not joining them in their ‘death-style’ (1 Peter 4:1–4). This rejection is evidence of our being ‘crucified to the world’ and of it being crucified to us. The world no longer has any place for us. Our destiny is in accompanying – or even in being one of – those who killed ‘for the word of God and for the testimony they had given’ (Revelation 6:9).

God wants us to be alert to the possibility that we are no longer living in this divine reality – and so are being worldly by doing godly business in worldly ways (Galatians 5:24; Ephesians 2:1–3; 2 Timothy 2:22; Titus 2:11–3:8; 1 Peter 1:14, 2:11; 1 John 2:15–17). This vigilance helps ensure that the *new* creation is alive to us and we are alive to it, and so that *this* creation and our lives in it are appreciated for their true worth and value (Galatians 6:14).

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<sup>22</sup> Watts, ‘Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed’.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’,  
[https://hymnary.org/text/a\\_mighty\\_fortress\\_is\\_our\\_god\\_a\\_bulwark](https://hymnary.org/text/a_mighty_fortress_is_our_god_a_bulwark).

# **God's presence with his people**

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## Christ our great High Priest

### **He was like us, with us**

We learn of Christ's appointment to the priesthood early in the epistle to the Hebrews and read that it is beneficial for us:

He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:17).

We are told that Jesus is the 'great high priest who has passed through the heavens' and that he is able 'to sympathise with our weaknesses' because he was tested 'in every respect ... as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4:14, 15).

Christ's appointment 'to the order of Melchizedek' as a 'priest forever' puts him 'in charge of things pertaining to God ... to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins', so glorifying his God and Father (Hebrews 5:1, 5). We read of his priestly ministry, of him having 'offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission' (Hebrews 5:7). Through the suffering of this priestly ministry 'he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Hebrews 5:9).

The author of Hebrews stated that Jesus' ministry establishes our hope because 'Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf', has now entered the 'inner shrine behind the curtain' (Hebrews 6:19, 20). The background narrative is that 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God' resembles the Son of God and that Jesus resembles Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1–3, 15). This dual resemblance relates to Jesus being a priest forever 'through the power of an indestructible life' (Hebrews 7:16, cf. 5:7).

### **He offered himself for us**

The nature of Jesus' sacrifice is made startlingly clear:

it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself (Hebrews 7:26, 27).

The writer indicated that it was 'necessary for this priest to have something to offer' (Hebrews 8:3) when he entered the heavenly sanctuary as mediator of the new covenant. His offering was his blood – not shed in heaven, but on the cross where 'through the eternal Spirit' he 'offered himself without blemish to God' (Hebrews 9:14). He entered the heavenly sanctuary not 'to offer himself again and again' because 'he has appeared once and for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Hebrews 9:25, 26):

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Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure’ (Hebrews 10:5, 6).

As both high priest and sacrifice, he put an end to the need for any other sacrifices for sin to be offered anywhere else; both within the Jewish system and outside of it (Hebrews 10:4, 9b). The Jewish system was confirmed as somewhat effective (Hebrews 9:13), but ‘when Christ came into the world’ it was no longer needed (Hebrews 10:5; cf. Romans 12:1).

The result of this action is clear: ‘it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’. Father-God was delighted with his Son and Christ who had ‘come to do your will, O God’ (Hebrews 10:7, 10, cf. 12:1 ‘who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross’; Psalm 40:6–8; also cf. Matthew 3:17, 17:5).<sup>24</sup>

Hence, ‘when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God”, and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet” (Hebrews 10:10–14, cf. 10:29; Psalms 110:1ff, cf. Psalm 2:1ff). The death of Christ was the defeat of God’s enemies. In Christ being priest and sacrifice, God embraced all evil in the humanity of Christ and exposed it to his holiness and love, so judging it forever. God dealt with sin in Christ by declaring evil to be an eternal failure, for all its apparent successes.

The ‘throne of grace’ (Hebrews 4:16) and Jesus’ victory forever focus on ‘the offering of the body of Christ’ (Hebrews 10:10). One act did what an uncountable number of sacrifices could never do: it took away sin and did that forever. Only God could deal with sin (Psalm 130). And only in humanity. The incarnation makes fullest sense in terms of Christ willingly being ‘sacrifice and offering’ for our sins (cf. Psalm 40:6).

### **The Spirit’s testimony in us and Jesus’ proclamation to us**

The testimony of the Spirit is clear: We now have God’s law on our hearts, and we delight to do God’s will. This means that the tyranny of sin and lawlessness is over forever (Hebrews 10:15–18). Our consciences are purified from dead works to serve and worship the living God (Hebrews 9:14).

The regal magnificence of this purification was not missed by the author of Hebrews (cf. Isaiah 52:13):

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<sup>24</sup> Psalm 2 focuses on the LORD’s son-king and Psalm 110 on the LORD’s priest-king. The writer of Hebrews has both Psalms in mind, interweaving them according to context. Hebrews 10 is significant for its mentions of the work of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:15–18, 29).

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Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up (Hebrews 8:1, 2).

We are ‘to live and move and have our being’ with Christ as high priest – ‘now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death’. Through his death God brings ‘many children to glory’ (Acts 17:28; Hebrews 2:5–10). Jesus and those for whom he pioneers salvation as apostle, high priest and perfector all have one Father (Hebrews 2:10ff, 3:1ff, 12:2).

In Hebrews 2:11–13, we read that Jesus proclaims his Father’s name to God’s family, to his ‘brothers and sisters’ (cf. Hebrews 1:1, 2). He leads the response of God’s people as their worship leader, praising his Father ‘in the midst of the congregation’ (cf. Hebrews 8:1, 2). Jesus is described as proclaiming God to humanity and as bringing humanity’s praises to God.

Jesus brings the Word of God to the congregation of God from within the congregation. He, as Word-become-flesh, is the proclamation (cf. John 1:1ff). He leads the congregation’s worship-service. This ministry is his eternal priesthood: he proclaims God to humanity as a human person, and leads humanity in worshipping God – before sin, during sin and after sin!

By quoting from Psalm 22:22 (Psalm 22 begins with ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’) in Hebrews 2:12, the writer of Hebrews affirmed that Jesus’ current ministry is the outworking of his death. In the face of the idolatrous worship that came upon him at the cross, and in the presence of the deceitful, lying accusations – the false words – that tore at his conscience, Jesus proclaimed his God to humanity and worshipped his God as humanity.

His cleansing of the temple was prophetic of his priestly sacrifice. The false worship was silenced, the Word was proclaimed, and the renewed children joined his worship. It is this Christ who speaks this Word today. Christ is present now as God’s Word to God’s family. And Christ leads the worship, he directs the ministry of ‘all who are led by the Spirit of God’ with the great variety of his gifts (Romans 8:14; cf. 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:1ff; Ephesians 4:7ff). We have no worship (spiritual gifts, services) but his worship: It is no longer we who worship, but Christ who worships in us, and the worship we give is by the faithfulness of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Galatians 2:20). To participate in this proclamation and worship (proclamation is an act of worship and worship proclaims) is to share in his conquest of the nations and fore-taste life in the eternal city (Psalm 22:23–32).

## Christ the present intercessor

### Approaching God through Christ Jesus

Jesus ‘always lives to make intercession’ for ‘those who approach God through him’ (Hebrews 7:25). Christ’s presence, as man, in heaven with his Father, is to be understood in the context of his priesthood. He ‘is a priest forever’ with no need to offer further sacrifices because he has already offered himself for our sins ‘once for all’ (Hebrews 7:17, 27). He ‘is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens’ (Hebrews 8:1). ‘Those who approach God through him’ are those whom ‘he is able for all time to save completely’ (Hebrews 7:25). The salvation established at the cross must be brought to fulfilment and completion. His intercession concerns the outworking of that salvation in us.

We are told that ‘Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf’ (Hebrews 9:24). His second appearing will not involve the removal of sin, as he has already ‘appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Hebrews 9:26). He could not be our present and future intercessor unless he, at God’s initiative, interceded and intervened for us on the cross. Likewise, the Spirit could not intercede for us unless sin was defeated at God’s initiative. There is one God acting with one purpose in eternal harmony and unity as the Son and the Spirit open access to God. Christ’s entry and appearance and the Spirit’s presence all occur with divine approval and affirmation.

Jesus’ intercession is ‘a more excellent ministry’ in the heavenly sanctuary that God has erected (Hebrews 8:6). God’s throne is in this sanctuary and the ‘Majesty in the heavens’ is eternally present with Jesus ‘seated at [his] right hand’ (Hebrews 8:1; cf. Revelation 4, 5). Christ’s intercession relates to our sharing in his worship and ministry, to our entering in and with him into his pure adoration of God, and of his ministry from God (cf. Hebrews 2:4, 9:11–14)! This helps us when we are being tested: we ‘receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16, cf. 2:18).

### Participating in God’s plan and purposes

This ministry answers Jesus’ prayer in John 17. As high priest and mediator of the new covenant, he gave his disciples his Father’s word, and they came to know him as sent from his Father. Jesus asked his holy and righteous Father to ‘protect’ them – ‘and all who will believe in me through their word’ – in his (Jesus’) own name from the evil one. He asked his Father to guard them, to fill them with his joy and to sanctify them in the truth, and he asked his Father that they see his glory as he sends them into the world (John 17:9–26; cf. Ephesians 3:7–13).

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All this confirms our participation in the communion and mission of the holy and righteous Father and his beloved Son. Jesus prayed that we may share the unity of God and live in God's love in the world (John 17:20–26; cf. Ephesians 2:17–22)! Christ's intercession, like the Holy Spirit's, brings about our participation in the life of God by grace, by the action of God's holiness, righteousness and love in the cross of Christ. Christ's intercession is God involving us in the defeat of all that opposes his plan and purpose for history. The impact of this intercession on us is radical (John 16:7, 13–15, 26, 27).

We need the intercession of the Spirit to 'guide us into the truth' of the dialogue of the Father and the Son concerning the 'things that are to come'. We need the Spirit's ministry to know Jesus' advocacy 'with the Father' (1 John 2:1, 2, 20ff, 4:1ff, 13ff). Jesus is our advocate *with* a grace-initiating Father, and not *to* a reluctant, adversarial Father. They are together in all things, especially in the atoning sacrifice mentioned in these verses.

Romans 8 reflects at least these two themes in John 17:

- Christ does not have to convince the Father concerning us; neither does the Spirit: God, the Father, is for us. 'If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Romans 8:31–34). This giving is the subject of the discourse of the triune God; of the intercession of Christ and the Spirit.
- This intercession is Christ's refusal to be separated (divorced, cut off) from us, even as 'we are being killed all day long; [as] we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered'. It makes us 'more than conquerors through him who loved us', unable to be separated 'from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:35–39).

The intercession of Christ is cosmic and racial, and thoroughly personal. It is the action of God doing good for us in the context of the renewal of all things. The Spirit's intercession relates to God working in all things and working them together for the good of those who love him. God's people are called, foreknown, predestined, justified and glorified. They obtain their glorious liberating freedom as 'heirs of God', as his family (Romans 8:26–30)!

Two warnings follow from these thoughts. Firstly, this intercession may seem to our fallen eyes to be ineffective or even to work against us. To the eyes of faith, it is the end of our idolatry and false worship; the end of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. It is the end of all that is of the world and not of the Father. It reveals the love of the Father to us and finishes our ungodly love for the world (1 John 2:15–17).

Secondly, Satanic accusations are primarily an attempt to convince us that because God, the Father, is judge, he is against us (cf. Revelation 12:10–12). We may then

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end up thinking that Jesus and the Holy Spirit need to convince the Father not to punish us. We may then think that there is friction or fraction in the Trinity. We do well to recall that

- the Father has given all judgement to the Son: they are one in judging evil.
- this judgement is given to Jesus as man: he is one with God in all things.
- the Holy Spirit convinces the world of sin, righteousness and judgement: he is one with Jesus and the Father in judgement.

God – Father, Son and Spirit – are one in judgement. There is complete unity in the Godhead concerning judgement, the defeat of Satan and all evil, the purifying of God's creation and the liberation of God's family. God's judgements are given to us as judgements of mercy. They are the redeeming grace whereby we are crucified with Christ and so die to the world and are made alive to God. The intercessions of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit recreate us in Christ. This is the Father's plan and joy. It is his plan to establish a new creation filled with his redeemed people living in the power of the Spirit fully imaging their Lord and Saviour.

It is impossible to be saved from God, but possible to be saved by God. It is God who has chosen to save us in Christ by the Spirit. They intercede to so protect us that we participate in their life and victory in history.

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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, 37.

## Prayer to the Father through the Son by the Spirit

### Divine initiative and intention

The title may suggest that we can initiate prayer from within ourselves, when the true initiative is God's. God sent his Son and gave his Spirit to him (John 3:33–36). God received his Son 'home' in the fullness of his resurrected humanity (John 13:1, 14:2). Without Jesus' coming we do not know God as Father and cannot receive the gift of the Spirit. Without him there can be no true communion with the triune God (Matthew 11:25–30).

This points us to what *precedes* every prayer and *embraces* our prayers, namely the prayer of Jesus as Messiah (Luke 11:1ff; John 17:1ff, e.g. 17:20). His prayer flows from his Father's initiative and his Father's gift of the Spirit to him as his Son. It also points us to what *follows* our prayers – not so much *from* our prayers, but *after* them. Just as Christ acts before we pray, so he continues to act afterwards (cf. Luke 22:31, 32). If Jesus has gone to such effort to secure us as God's family that we might in this way be included in his prayers, will he then abandon us in this life – and in the eternity ahead (Romans 8:26–39)?

Our prayers are enfolded in triune purpose and triune fulfilment. Despite appearances, nothing of the divine mystery of love is ever lost (1 Corinthians 2:6–13). When we are tempted to desperation because of our current situations and our ever-present sinfulness, when all seems desolate and depressing and we cry for pardon and mercy, there is a word from heaven that declares the unimaginable. This word is not an immediate release from our lot in life; it is assurance that he who has begun 'a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6).

### Eternal presence and participation

God does not wait until we see this final day. He comes to us every day in our pride, our self-confidence, our ambitions and our own worldviews and takes whatever morsel of faith he finds and makes it into a festive banquet where he teaches us the truth about what takes place when our prayers are answered. He brings us to the death of our old humanity, the resurrection of our body, and into eternal participation in the majesty and mystery of the new creation. We learn that our prayers are embraced in his prayers, and that their fulfilment is according to his promise and plan. This perspective does not diminish us but completes us by transforming us into and conforming us to his own image and likeness (Philippians 3:20, 21, cf. 3:9, 10).

There is always one to whom we can turn for mercy and with whom is 'grace to help in time of need', and hence someone to whom we can give thanks (Hebrews 4:16). This one is in, before and after all that happens (Revelation 1:1ff, especially 1:5, 6, 9–13). True prayer is communion. It is a flow of thanksgiving to the triune

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God for his care for us in our misery. It is a calling out for deliverance from our own evil. It is a cry for rescue from the world-system and from unwelcome actions by other people. Thanksgiving anticipates times ahead when deliverance may be needed and looks for deliverance in the hope that further thanksgiving will follow (Philippians 4:4–9).

### **Entering Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation**

The Son is towards the Father, but humanity has its backs to him (John 1:1–18). We turn to see who is speaking when we hear the Father declare that Jesus is the Son whom he loves and the Son calling him Father (Matthew 3:13–17, 17:1–6; John 12:27–33; c.f. Revelation 1:12). It is then that our eyes are filled with the sight of the cross and God's crucified Son. And it is then, while we are overcome by the confusion and horror of such an event as this, that we hear this desolate one, who for a moment seemed so serpentine, cry out for the fullness of the Spirit, and in that fullness, commit himself into his Father's hands (Matthew 27:46; John 19:28; Luke 23:46). As Paul later declared: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Romans 8:32).

What then is Trinitarian prayer? It is an entering into his crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation where, and only where, true deliverance is found, and for which all true thanksgiving is oriented and expressed. It is then that our thanksgiving becomes an exhortation which, in the Spirit, calls out to all humanity to enter eternity with us through this darkest of desolate doors. This prayer is essential to knowing the grace, mercy and peace of God when we suffer and are persecuted. Otherwise we too easily conclude that our strength is in ourselves and not in Christ who alone has conquered the world, the flesh and the devil (John 16:32, 33; 2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

More than focusing on the deliverance and thanksgiving that are ours, is our delight in the Saviour to whom, in whom and through whom all such prayer occurs (Ephesians 2:13–22). The intercession of Christ and the Spirit is prayer in all these ways. Christ intervenes for us against our enemies, calling on his Father, who initiated Christ's own work of intercession as Son, and the Spirit's work of intercession, to act as one God for our eternal welfare. God intervenes so that our doxologies and anthems are music not only to our ears and those of all God's family, but that they become acceptable worship in the true temple and sanctuary which is God himself (Romans 8:26ff; 1 John 2:1ff; Hebrews 2:10–18, 7:25–8:3; Romans 12:1; Revelation 21:22–27).

What then of our prayer? It is our reaching out in faith to a loving Saviour. It is our confession of the empty vanity of this world and the fullness of the one to come. It is our declaration of our complete lack of courage and strength to sustain ourselves. It is our delight to be the community of the triune God.

## The priestly community

### In the Old Testament

#### *From Abel to Moses*

Abel was the first person who is nominated as offering an acceptable sacrifice. Enoch lived in the presence of God, while Noah ‘found favour in the sight of the LORD’, built an ark and an altar and received a covenant concerning the renewal of creation (Genesis 6:8). Job, likewise, offered sacrifices as one ‘who feared God and turned away from evil’ (Job 1:1). His was a priestly ministry for his family.<sup>26</sup>

Abram, returning from the defeat of his enemies, met King Melchizedek of Salem (Genesis 14:18–20). Melchizedek ‘brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High’. He blessed Abram and blessed ‘God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth’, and Abram gave him a tenth of everything. Note the function of the priest in God’s blessing of Abram and in bringing Abram’s grateful response to God. It was prior to this priestly ministry of Melchizedek that God had covenanted with Abraham to bless ‘all the families of the earth’ through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Abraham was later told that his descendants would be oppressed as ‘aliens in a land that is not theirs … for 400 years’ before returning to the promised land (Genesis 15:13).

Moses led the Israelites into the desert to worship God by offering sacrifices (Exodus 3:18, 4:23, etc.). This worship shaped their identity as a people and their life in the presence of God. This was the way God rescued Abraham’s descendants from Egypt and brought them to himself – into his presence to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation among all the nations (Exodus 19:3–6, cf. Exodus 32 to 34; Numbers 9:15–23; Deuteronomy 5:22). The significance of their worship was great. For the first time in history there was a redeemed nation worshipping the LORD! No wonder it was so contested in Egypt and in the wilderness (and in all human history since then)!

#### *David and the prophets*

King David looked for a greater king than himself; one who would ‘rule in the midst of [his] foes’. The LORD decreed to David that this king would ‘sit at my right hand until I make all your enemies your footstall’ (Psalm 110). Hence this king rules as priest over all the nations: ‘The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”’ (Psalm 110:2–4, cf. Psalm 2 where the Messiah is the LORD’s son and receives the nations as his heritage.)

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<sup>26</sup> The story of Job, if based on historical events, most likely occurred much later, but is included here because of several similarities with Noah, Enoch and Abel.

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Israel could only be this priestly people under the royal priesthood of this Messiah. They had failed as a people and went to the nations under judgement rather than on a joyful priestly mission. In their demise, Isaiah spoke of a servant who would be ‘a shoot … from the stump of Jesse’ and ‘the Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him’. He would ‘stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious’. He would break the yoke of Israel’s oppressors and his authority and kingship would grow continually. His name would be ‘Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace’ (Isaiah 9:1–7, 11:1–9).

In the later prophecies in Isaiah, it is the suffering servant who brings ‘forth justice to the nations’. This servant restores the people so that they are ‘a light to the nations’ (Isaiah 42:1–9). He brings ‘Jacob back to him’. Yet

it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6–7).

In Isaiah 61:1–7, the recovery of Israel’s priestly ministry flows from the anointing of the Spirit on Messiah and his people. This restoration links with the servant of Isaiah 53:12 who ‘poured out himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors’. God, says Isaiah, saw that there was no intervener or helper as ‘Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled’. Only the LORD acts to reverse this evil: ‘The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him’ (Isaiah 59:14–16). Only one coming from ‘Bozrah in garments stained crimson’ can help. (Isaiah 63:1ff; Isaiah 59 and 63 to 65 fill out aspects of the nation’s longing for a redeemer and God’s gift of himself to them.)

In preparation for the new earth and heavens that God creates as redeemer, God promised to bring ‘all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the LORD’, just as the Israelites brought grain offerings to God (Isaiah 66:17–25). In addition, some of those who return will be taken as priests and all humanity will worship the LORD and see his glory (Isaiah 66:18–23).

They will be ‘joyful in my house of prayer’, with God’s house being ‘for all peoples’ ‘to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants’ (Isaiah 56:6, 7). This is in stark contrast to those who trust the temple, abuse the stranger, the orphan and the widow, and convert God’s house into a ‘den of thieves’. Making ‘cakes for the queen of heaven’ and pouring ‘out drink offerings to other gods’ is a

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horrible contrast to Israel's calling as a holy nation and a royal priesthood. Not living in covenant obedience to their redeemer brings awful consequences (Jeremiah 7).

### In the New Testament

#### *Jesus and the temple*

Simeon's prophecy when Jesus was brought into the temple was in harmony with the Old Testament in declaring the presence of God with his people and Jesus being 'a light for revelation to the nations and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:27–35).

Jesus referred to Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7 when cleansing the temple. These passages may have been on his mind as he taught in the temple. Those listening were 'spellbound' while 'the chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him' (Luke 19:45–48). John's account of the same or a similar incident mentions Jews asking him for a sign to authenticate his action. Jesus spoke of his body as the temple which, if torn down, would be rebuilt in three days. His body was certainly the temple of the Holy Spirit (John 2:13–25, 3:34, 7:37–39).

#### *The letter to the Hebrews*

Christ is identified as 'a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people'. He 'has passed through the heavens' to the 'throne of grace' which we may approach with boldness 'to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 2:14–18, 4:14–16).

The royal nature of this priest was sure: he is the son-king-messiah-priest of Psalms 2 and 110 (Hebrews 1). He brings many to glory through his death, for which he is crowned. His priestly ministry is clearly indicated in Hebrews 2:10–13 where he proclaims God's name (i.e. Father) to God's family-congregation and identifies with 'the children whom God has given [him]'.

The nature of his priesthood, its identification with humanity and its divine origin, is evident: Jesus learned his high priesthood in his obedient, reverent submission in his sufferings, with his priesthood being 'forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Hebrews 5:5–10).

The link between Jesus' high priesthood and God's covenant with Abraham is clear. We have the same hope as Abraham had because Jesus, 'having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek', has entered 'the inner shrine behind the curtain' as 'a forerunner on our behalf' (Hebrews 5:10, 6:19, 20). The blessings God promised the nations in his covenant with Abraham relate to Melchizedek who 'collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises' (Hebrews 7:5).

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Israel was the priestly kingdom and the holy nation descended from Abraham, and its priest-tribe, the Levites, ‘paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him’ (Hebrews 7:10). In Hebrews 7:27 we read of the only sacrificial offering made by the ‘high priest of the order of Melchizedek’. Note that Melchizedek ‘brought out bread and wine’ rather than offer a blood sacrifice (Genesis 14:18).

Jesus, descended from the tribe of Judah, was not a Levite. Rather, his priesthood comes ‘through the power of an indestructible life’. We have ‘a better hope, through which we approach God’, with Jesus the guarantor of a ‘better covenant’ and ‘better promises’. He is the holy, blameless, undefiled and exalted high priest who leads worship in a heavenly sanctuary. This ‘more excellent ministry’ secures forgiveness of sins and the writing of the law of God on the hearts of his people, bringing people to ‘Know the Lord’. This is the essence of the complete salvation of those ‘who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Hebrews 7:15–8:13, cf. 7:19, 25 with 4:16, 10:1, 22, 11:6 concerning approaching God).

The Holy Spirit knew that ‘the way into the sanctuary’ was through the ‘high priest of the good things that have [already] come’. This was because he knew Christ would, ‘through the eternal Spirit’, offer ‘himself without blemish to God’. The shedding of his blood secures an ‘eternal redemption’ having purified ‘our consciences from dead works to worship the living God’ (Hebrews 9:1–14).

As ‘mediator of a new covenant’ Jesus ensures that ‘those who are called … receive the promised eternal inheritance’ (Hebrews 9:15). We can be confident of this assurance as Christ now appears ‘in the presence of God on our behalf’. Moreover, he ‘will appear a second time’ to complete the promised salvation of God’s people; that salvation established in his ‘once for all’ appearing ‘to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Hebrews 9:23–28).

Christ’s priesthood removes sins and bring us into full worship (Hebrews 10:11). He can do this because he is both priest and sacrifice. The throne of grace and the defeat of death have already been linked to Christ’s priesthood. This is emphasised again in chapter 10 where we are told that ‘when Christ came into the world’ he knew that his body was for sacrifice according to God’s will (Hebrews 10:5). ‘It was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats’ through ‘burnt offerings and sin offerings’ ‘to take away sins’ (Hebrews 10:4–6; cf. Psalm 51:14).

And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. … But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God,’ and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstall for his feet’. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Hebrews 10:10–13).

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The sovereignty of Christ offering himself ‘for all time [as] a single sacrifice for sins’ not only establishes us as forgiven and defeats his enemies, it puts the law of the triune God in our hearts and minds. We are one with Christ when doing God’s will. We have the testimony and affirmation of the Holy Spirit that these things are so.

We now have a bold entry into ‘the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us … through his flesh’ (Hebrews 10:20). We are to encourage each other in our life of faith in adversity and under God’s discipline (Hebrews 11 and 12). Our eyes are set on the eternal city of the living God and its God and mediator. In and through him we are urged to ‘let mutual love continue’, ‘to show hospitality to strangers’, to ‘remember those in prison’, to ‘let marriage be held in honour by all’, to ‘keep your lives free from the love of money’, to ‘remember … those who spoke the word of God to you’, and to be confident in the unchanging Jesus as we ‘bear the abuse he endured’ (Hebrews 13:1–14).

Our lives as the priestly community are the continual offering of ‘a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name’ and the doing of good and of sharing ‘for such sacrifices are pleasing to God’ (Hebrews 13:14–16).

### *The book of Revelation*

The links between grace and the throne, the resurrection and the ruling of the nations, and our release from sins and our being a priestly kingdom serving Christ’s God and Father, are foundational to the book of Revelation. While John sees Christ as the Lamb of God and not explicitly as a priest, Jesus’ ministry makes us ‘a kingdom and priests serving our God’ (Revelation 5:10, 1:6). Incense is offered with the ‘prayers of the saints on the golden altar’ and the judgements of God follow (Revelation 8:3, 4, 5:8). The early church was taught that ‘under the altar [are] the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given’ (Revelation 6:9).

The contrast between the restlessness of ‘those who worship the beast [and the dragon and the false prophet] and its image’, and those worshipping God ‘day and night within his temple’, secure from the scorching heat of the sun and sheltered and nourished by ‘the one on the throne’ becomes clearer and clearer (Revelation 14:11, 7:15, 4:2, 5:1, 6:16). ‘God’s temple in heaven is opened’, revealing the ark of the covenant, and further judgements follow when an ‘angel came out of the temple in heaven’ (Revelation 11:19, 14:15).

As the wrath of God ends, the conquerors of ‘the beast and its image and the number of its name’ sing the song of Moses and the Lamb, declaring that ‘all nations will come and worship’ the holy one, the King of the nations, the Lord God Almighty (Revelation 15:1–4). In the New Jerusalem ‘his servants will worship him; they shall see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads’

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(Revelation 22:3, 4, cf. 7:3, 9:4, 14:1, 20:4). ‘The throne of God and of the Lamb’ are in the city which has no temple ‘for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb’. It is a priestly city, fulfilling the last section of Isaiah 66 as the glory and honour of the nations are brought into it (Revelation 1:4–8, 5:1–14, 21:22–22:5).

### *The new community in Peter’s first letter*

On the Day of Pentecost everything that was anticipated by the Old Testament prophecies came into view. Each Gospel (as well as the book of Acts) records some of Christ’s final words to his disciples. It is difficult not to see that the people of God belong to the priest-king of these Old Testament prophecies (Matthew 28:18–20, cf. 26:64; Luke 24:30, 50–52; John 20:19–23; Acts 1:6–8, 2:32–36). They share in Christ’s communion with his Father in the Spirit and in Messiah’s mission to the ends of the earth. They do so in the power of the outpoured Spirit according to the Father’s times and seasons.

Peter wrote that this new community – the church – is built on the living stone rejected by humanity but ‘chosen and precious in God’s sight’. As ‘living stones’ we are to ‘be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’. Peter quotes David and Isaiah to contrast those who stumbled and fell and panicked (were put to shame, were dismayed) with those who believed and received Christ as precious. Those who come to God’s chosen and precious cornerstone are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Peter 2:1–11).

Jesus is assumed to be *the* priest-king in whom God’s people (who were no people until they received the mercy of Christ’s priestly ministry) have their being as a royal priesthood. Christ is the chosen, beloved Son who ‘suffered for [us]’ by bearing ‘our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed’ (1 Peter 2:21–25). Our appeal to God for a clean conscience is based on his resurrection and on his now being ‘at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him’ (1 Peter 3:21–22).

We are urged to leave behind the futile ways of our ancestors since we have been redeemed by ‘the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish’ (1 Peter 1:19). The Father’s mercy has provided an ‘inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time’ (1 Peter 1:4, 5). We rejoice in receiving this inheritance even though we suffer (1 Peter 1:3–9) This suffering is in Christ who came according to the Spirit’s promises (1 Peter 1:10–12, 4:13–20).

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As a priestly people and a holy nation, they were urged as

aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge (1 Peter 2:11, 12).

Our lives are to be holy, in Christ who ‘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’. Those to whom Peter wrote had ‘already spent enough time in doing what the nations like to do’ and were urged by the apostle to ‘be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers’ (1 Peter 3:18, 4:3, 7). Their priestly, royal calling was to be seen in sharing together as well as in speaking. Their leaders were eagerly to tend the flock by example, to live humbly, to resist the devil, and after having suffered for a while, they would be restored, supported, strengthened and established in the eternal glory of Christ by the God of all grace. The relationships of God’s people are also emphasised (1 Peter 4:10–11, 5:1–11).

### *The temple of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s letters*

The apostle Paul wrote that the church is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Christian worship expresses this reality, especially in sharing the Lord’s Supper as a participation in the body and blood of Christ (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 6, 10–14; 2 Corinthians 6; Ephesians 5; Colossians 4).

Although Paul does not refer to Christ as a priest in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul states that Christ has been declared as being raised from the dead and seated at God’s right hand in heaven with authority in and over all other authorities and powers. He is head over all things ‘for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:20–22, cf. 5:21–32). Christ’s coming and proclaiming peace ‘to you who were far off and peace to you who were near’ so that ‘both have access in one Spirit to the Father’ is priestly in character. This is further seen when the two ‘you’ peoples are built together ‘into a holy temple in the Lord … a dwelling place for God’, and where Christ’s blood is the means God uses to break down the divisions and create this new humanity from all the nations (Ephesians 2:11–22).

Paul appealed to the Roman Christians ‘to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [and reasonable] worship’ and that ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone’. This priestly living is never apart from the ‘one God’, since there is ‘one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all’ (Romans 12:1–2; 1 Timothy 2:1–7). Paul spoke of his own calling in this way (Philippians 2:14–18, 4:18).

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Paul wrote of ‘the grace given me by God to be 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’. This priestly service, which offers the nations to God in the gospel, is ‘what Christ has accomplished through’ Paul. The obedience Christ has won through Paul has come ‘by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God’ to people in places ‘where Christ has not been named’ (Romans 15:14–21).

## Highlights of the priestly community's life and ministry

The priestly community is

- born out of redemptive suffering; its priesthood is accepted by God but rejected by the nations. Its priesthood is Christ's, who is both priest and sacrifice according to the eternal covenant of God.
- in Christ and the Spirit. Its life is in Christ as priest-king and depends on his intercession and intervention. It receives the intercession, comfort and help of the Spirit according to God's will and initiative, by his sovereign grace.
- in communion with the triune God, at 'rest' in his 'presence', and on mission 'to the ends of the earth' until the 'ends of the ages' when its final 'salvation' and 'sanctification' will be eternally evident.
- a people living in God's love and unity (in giving, receiving, thanksgiving and asking). This is their proclamation as they speak the oracles of God and serve one another and all creation according to the law of the triune God now written on their hearts and lived out in their sharing together.
- inheriting all the blessings promised to Abraham (who was under Melchizedek's priesthood) and the nations through him. This includes Israel who was called to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation among all the nations.
- the priestly kingdom of the new creation. It is blessed with God's grace and peace which bring forgiveness and holiness, and participation in the kinds of suffering endured by Christ as high priest and sacrifice (Lamb).
- ministering to the nations 'in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the nations may be acceptable, sanctified by the Spirit' (Romans 15:16).
- offering spiritual sacrifices of praise in its worship to God, and its service to humanity.
- is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, and witnesses to this in the Lord's Supper and Baptism where its ministry to the nations flows from its participation in the body and blood of Christ and from the 'water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5).

## A priestly kingdom

### Faithful witnesses

Revelation 1:5 speaks of Christ's love for us, and of his releasing us 'from our sins by his blood'. This verse describes the wonderful way he has 'made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to whom be the glory and dominion forever'. Jesus has brought us into his Father's kingdom. God the Father, 'who is and who was and who is to come', rules by grace and peace in this kingdom. The Spirit who is 'before his throne' is one with Father-God in reigning, and Jesus is the 'faithful witness' to and active participant in this majestic outpouring of sovereign grace and peace. He is no passive observer. He is the unique witness because of who he is and what he does. He is 'the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. He is one with his Father and the Holy Spirit in ruling by grace and peace (Revelation 1:1–8).

Being true worshippers means being faithful witnesses and testifying truthfully. The lives of true worshippers are priestly, and their service is royal. These worshippers and witnesses proclaim God to the world and praise God in the world. All this worship and witness occurs in the Holy Spirit and involves witnessing to Jesus Christ as Lord and giving testimony to him. Only in the Holy Spirit and because of Jesus Christ can our 'God and Father ... the Lord God ... the Almighty' be truly declared and adored.

The Revelation is the 'revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place'. John testified to Jesus' testimony, and to Jesus as the testimony, of the Father's actions in history. This witness culminates in the declaration of verse 7:

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. So it is to be. Amen.

Christ is the Lord of history, and his cross is central to his sovereign Lordship. All who see him – and all will see him – will be judged by his grace and mercy. Those who read 'aloud the words of the prophecy' and those who hear and keep 'what is written in it' will be blessed (Revelation 1:3). These words are not locked away for some remote future; they express the dynamic power of God's action throughout human history and into eternity.

### Universal command and intimate communion

What then is it to be made into a kingdom, into priests serving Christ's God and Father, and so serving Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? John made his own answer clear: it meant sharing with God's people in 'the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance', being in exile with them 'because of the word of God and

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the testimony of Jesus' and being together with them 'in the spirit on the Lord's day' (Revelation 1:9, 10).

The Lord's authority reaches the ends of the earth and the depths of humanity's existence. His command is universal, while his communion with those whom he brings into his kingdom is profoundly intimate. To be in his kingdom is to be in the Spirit – and to be in the Spirit is to be in his kingdom. This priestly service is obedient and joyful worship of the triune God. It is faithful participation in God's revelation of himself to all humanity and in all creation.

In the description that follows, Jesus, clothed as this priest-king, declared who he was, instructed John to write down what he had seen and explained that the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands involved the seven churches (Revelation 1:17–20). Jesus was among the seven churches as this priest-king, and his actions and declarations to the seven churches were as priest-king:

- Jesus Christ – with the Father and the Spirit – was *among them*. He was with faithful conquerors, preparing them for the final victory of God.
- He *served them* by telling them what they needed to know, and by helping and encouraging them in their battles and sufferings.
- He *guarded them* by warning them of the dangers they faced, and by ensuring they knew his authority over all that they would endure.

In the account of creation in Genesis 2, we are told that humanity was to walk with the LORD God in Eden. The ground was to be cultivated, and the LORD God was to be served in his royal sanctuary by nurturing and guarding Eden, so ensuring that they remained in God's service and in full communion with their Creator-God. This life of royal priesthood was to bring fullness to humanity and creation as God's image. Living in this blessing meant being fruitful by multiplying, filling and subduing the earth, so enabling it to produce its full abundance. This subjugation was not to hostile forces or predatory action but involved extending Eden to the ends of the earth. God's purposes were to be done this way 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10; cf. Luke 11:1ff), with humanity being the glorious image and likeness of God, and creation delighting in its freedom (cf. Romans 8).

Christ came as firstborn of creation and as second and final Adam to dismantle humanity's rebellion and its accompanying graceless hostility by his mercy, grace and peace (Colossians 1:11–23; Romans 5:14ff; 1 Corinthians 15:20–50)!

### **Not by might or power, but by God's spirit**

God's priestly kingdom and his royal priesthood have been in action from Abel and will be up to the final events at end of the Book of Revelation. This section is limited to brief comments from a few Old Testament passages.

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God commanded Abram to go ‘from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’. The purpose God gave him was clear (Genesis 12:1–3). Melchizedek’s declaration as King of Salem and priest of God Most High affirmed what God was about, as did Abram’s response (Genesis 14:17–20).

When Israel came out of Egypt, God prefaced his giving the Law to them by saying to them that they had

seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, 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 (Exodus 19:3–6).

Moses later re-emphasised the importance of this word of God to their destiny and welfare as a nation. The promised land would be a place of judgement should they forget to teach this to their children and their children’s children (Deuteronomy 4:5–8, 7:6–16).

David’s kingship, despite his and the people’s obvious failures, was thought of as the highest point of Israel’s history. Studying this era shows something of the dynamic life of Israel under his rule as shepherd-king. Joab was a lead warrior, Zadok a significant priest, Nathan a powerful prophet, and Asaph a gifted musician (as, for example, in 1 Chronicles 16:1ff). Yet Israel’s monarchy had arisen in the context of the people’s rejection of God as king (1 Samuel 8:4–9) and failed for the same reason. Reading about the kings of Israel can teach us ways in which faithless pride differs from trusting service!

Esther the queen, Jeremiah the prophet, Ezekiel the priest and Daniel the ruler are examples of women and men who had significant roles in Israel’s history. The return of the exiles under Nehemiah’s leadership and Ezra’s priesthood focuses attention on Israel as a priestly kingdom, and on their need to be a holy people, serving God as their maker and redeemer.

Haggai and Zechariah describe the rebuilding of the temple under governor Zerubbabel and high-priest Joshua. Peace and community are promised when the ‘guilt of the land is removed in a single day’. Grace summarises the royal, priestly worship as the people live in the Spirit under the leadership of ‘my servant the Branch’. They obey the LORD and live ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit’ (Zechariah 3:8–4:7). The picture in Zechariah 4 of the lampstands brings us back to Revelation 1 and Christ as king-priest. He rules until not only the striving of the nations is finished, but until the striving of his people is over and they rest actively in the eternal sabbath of God, who is always working (cf. Hebrews 4)!

## Christ – mediator and priest to and for all nations

### One mediator between God and humankind

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all – this was attested at the right time (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).

But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

The ministry referred to in these passages relates to Christ as high priest, seated at the ‘right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven’ (Hebrews 8:1). He is there because he has ‘something to offer’ (Hebrews 8:3), something that enables him to write the laws of God on the hearts and minds of God’s people. It is something which, in the mercy of God through God’s forgiveness of sins, brings people to know God (Hebrews 9:15).

What Christ offered is made clear: he offered himself. He ‘appeared as a high priest of the good things that are to come’ or, ‘that are already here’ (NIV), and ‘entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption’. It is ‘the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, [which purifies] our conscience from dead works to worship the living God’ (Hebrews 9:11–14).

It is the ministry of Christ and our receiving ‘the promised eternal inheritance’ (Hebrews 9:15) which leads us to

Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22–24).

By referring to Abel, the writer of the book of Hebrews was describing Christ not primarily in terms of a faithful remnant from Israel, but as creating a renewed humanity to live in a renewed creation.

### God’s Son is creator and inheritor

God has spoken to us ‘by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds’ (Hebrews 1:1–2). This means that the one spoken of by the writer as being mediator is God’s first and last word to the world. Christ inherits all that the Father has created through him. Whatever happens in

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the interim relates to him as creator and inheritor! Whatever the nations and people of the world do is best understood in this context.

We are told that Christ ‘is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and [that] he sustains all things by his powerful word’. This Son, this human person, Jesus, speaks to this creation that has come to being through him, and which he inherits. Jesus speaks not as an echo or even only as a reflection of God, but as God, as the ‘radiance of God’s glory’ and the ‘very stamp of [God’s] nature’ (Hebrews 1:3 NIV and RSV).

We are informed that his inheritance centres in him having made purification for sins and sitting down at the ‘right hand of the Majesty on high’ (Hebrews 1:3). These two actions are as broad in their significance as the writer’s definition of Jesus in the opening two verses.

The author then quoted a series of Old Testament passages to develop the logic about Jesus:

- He is Son (1:5): Psalm 2 clearly relates to the nations.
- He is creator (1:6–7): Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 104:4 relate the angels to God’s actions as creator and defender of his people among the nations.
- He is king (1:8, 9): Psalm 45 refers to the king and his bride living under and in the rule of God (cf. Isaiah 61:1–7 relates to the blessings of the one on whom the Spirit of the Lord dwells coming to the nations).
- He is creator-king (1:10–12): Psalm 102:12–28 and Isaiah 34:1–4 describe the judgements and renewal of the nations.
- He is priest-king (1:13): Psalm 110 tells of his victory as priest over the nations.

### **God’s Son brings God’s family to glory**

Jesus, whom we ‘see … crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death’ (Hebrews 2:9), fulfils Psalm 8. We are told in Hebrews 2:8 that God ‘left nothing outside their control’, that is, outside of the oversight of the same humanity that God considers and cares for (Psalm 8:4). In Hebrews 2:5ff, it is to Jesus that ‘the coming world’ is subjected. It is Jesus, ‘for whom and through whom all things exist’, who brings God’s family ‘to glory’. It is Jesus who, as the ‘merciful and faithful high priest’, provides the ‘sacrifice of atonement’ for the sins of the descendants of Abraham whom he has come to help (Hebrews 2:14–18).

This mediation is explained in Hebrews 2:11–13 in connection with God’s fatherhood. Jesus proclaims God as Father to ‘the children God has given [him]’ and leads the worship of ‘those who are sanctified’ from among them as they gather together as God’s family.

### **God's Son is high priest**

Quoting Psalm 110, the author of the book of Hebrews wrote that Christ is high priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek' who, 'resembling the Son of God, remains a priest forever' (Hebrews 5:1–10, 6:20, 7:1–17). 'His name, in the first place, means "king of righteousness"; next he is also king of Salem, that is, "king of peace"' (Hebrews 7:1ff). This name involves Abraham and the nations: 'Levi ... paid tithes through Abraham' to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:9).

Christ's priestly status and function relates to all nations, whereas the priests according to the Mosaic covenant primarily concerned Israel. The blood of Jesus' sacrifice of himself for humanity is the 'blood of the eternal covenant' and was shed for people from every nation. Melchizedek's provision of bread and wine for Abraham testified to Christ's provision for God's people (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Jesus dealt with sin 'once for all when he offered himself' (Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 26, 10:2, 10) and 'is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:25, cf. 10:12–14).

### **Jesus' ministry today**

Jesus intercedes for us against the spiritual and human powers that oppose God (Hebrews 10:13). He does this by bringing us into the eternal worship that exists in the heavenly sanctuary of which he is minister: he proclaims God's word as God's word, and he leads the worship of the people of God in God's world. This heavenly sanctuary is God's dwelling place, where he is with his people (Hebrews 8:1ff, 12:18ff).

Because Jesus has tasted death for everyone as the sacrifice of atonement, he is concerned to help Abraham's descendants among the nations by forgiving the sins of God's people (Hebrews 2:9–18, cf. 7:26, 9:26). He does this through the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:8ff, 2:1–4, 9:14).

## God's presence and our worship

### The worship we bring

Moses was sent by God to Pharaoh with the message that 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God' (Exodus 3:18). Having taken leave of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses was told by God to 'say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me'"' (Exodus 4:21–23).

The worship described in Exodus 15 is the first significant recorded corporate worship of the people of God (cf. Romans 9:4; note the story of Seth in Genesis 4:25). The people of God worshipped in the wilderness! God led them by fire and cloud. He took them from the bitter springs at Mara to the 12 springs and 70 palm trees at Elim. He gave them manna from heaven and water from a rock as they went towards Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:22–27)!

When the people saw Moses delaying in coming down from the mountain, a great contrast to Exodus 15 unfolded (Exodus 32:1–6)! How ridiculous their golden calf seems! Yet our idols are even more ridiculous to God. Through the crisis of the golden calf, God focused on his presence with them and their worship of him (Exodus 32:7–14). Israel was reminded by God that they were called to be the nation who knew God's presence in true worship and service, and who were to proclaim this good news to other nations (Exodus 32:12, cf. Isaiah 49:6). Moses knew the seriousness of this calling when faced with the people's rebellion (Exodus 4:24–26, 32:30–34). When God relented from destroying the Israelites because of their idolatry, God initially said he would now only send his angel to be with them (Exodus 32:34, 33:2).

The Tent of Meeting was where 'the LORD used to speak with Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' and 'all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent ... [and] the pillar of cloud would stand at the entrance of the tent' (Exodus 33:7–11). This was the setting for Moses' intercession with God. Moses said he would not lead the people unless God went with him – unless they were in God's presence (Exodus 33:12–16). God's response came in the renewed covenant promise of Exodus 33:14. The people were distinguished by God's presence with them; that was the basis for their being, their worship and their presence in the world.

The worship we bring is either a rejoicing in God's freely given salvation and sanctification, and hence it is in God's presence (as it was in Exodus 15), or it is a seeking for God's presence through works of worship and service (as it was in Exodus 32 where worship was in the absence of God's presence). True worship is either the fruit of justification issuing in love, joy and peace, or it is a seeking for

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justification (cf. Luke 18:9–14). God’s gift of justification is a covenant blessing given in grace and mercy (Romans 4 and 5).

Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the LORD: This gate of the LORD, into which the righteous shall enter. I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation. The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. *This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it* (Psalm 118:19–24 (italics added, cf. Psalm 51:7–15).

### God’s presence precedes true worship

True worship is our response to being in God’s presence and occurs not only in church but in all aspects of our lives. This is evident in the sabbath promise in the ten commandments. The sabbath commandments link with creation in Exodus 20:11 and with grace in Deuteronomy 5:15.

Worship is given to us in creation as God’s sons and daughters (cf. Acts 17:22–31). It is then given back (fore-given, restored) to us by the grace of salvation and sanctification (cf. John 4:21–24 and Exodus 32 to 34). From both perspectives, true worship is preceded by God’s presence.

### God’s presence is Trinitarian

Our worship occurs because of God’s initiative (cf. Revelation 1). It is led by elders around the throne of God (cf. Revelation 5). It is the essence of the witness of the church to the nations (cf. Revelation 11). It is the final eternal expression of the redeemed, resurrected people of God (cf. Revelation 21 and 22). The account of Moses is the sketch and the shadow of Christ described in the book of Revelation (Hebrews 3:1–6, 8:1–7).

It is Christ, with the Father and the Spirit, whom we worship, as church liturgies acknowledge and declare: ‘Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again’.<sup>27</sup> It is Christ who is the ‘pioneer of our salvation’, and who is ‘crowned with glory and honour’ (Hebrews 2:9, 10, cf. 1:3, 4, 13 and 2:3–4). It is Christ who is the true worshipper, from eternity in, with and for humanity.

How wonderful to declare that ‘We are the body of Christ, the Father-God’s family: his Spirit is with us’ (cf. Hebrews 3:14).<sup>28</sup> How rich to know that Christ, in leading our thankful praise to Father-God, proclaims Father-God to God’s family (Hebrews 2:12–13). How assuring to know that *his* worship is as sacrifice

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<sup>27</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, 147.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Ibid. 145. There are also trinitarian nuances in the original declaration (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>), Book V, Chapter 6. ‘For by the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit ...’.

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and priest (Hebrews 2:17), and that we have a high priest who is able ‘to sympathize with our weaknesses’, and ‘who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15). And how encouraging to ‘therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16).

Reflecting on Paul’s teaching, we may say that ‘It is no longer we who worship, but Christ who worships in us, and our worship is by faith in [or, the faith of] the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us’ (Galatians 2:20, paraphrased). This worship is what it means for us to be ‘a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God’ and ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’ (Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Corinthians 6:19). We ‘glorify God’ in our bodies by the Spirit; our boast is in Christ Jesus and not in the flesh (Philippians 3:3; Galatians 6:14).

### **Worship as priestly service**

We, as people of the final *exodus*, have no hands but his hands, no feet but his feet (Luke 9:31; Revelation 1:6, 5:9–14, 7:9–12). Just as Christ’s worship draws us into God’s presence by the Spirit, our worship witnesses to the world that we are the ‘house of prayer for all nations’ (Isaiah 56:7).

No wonder we are not to worship worship, and ‘desire evil as they did’. The ‘ends of the ages’ are upon us (1 Corinthians 10:1–11). The table of demons and idols is no comparison to the table of the Lord. As John wrote, ‘our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (1 John 1:3). John added that ‘we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit’ (1 John 4:13).

Paul made his thoughts about true worship clear. There cannot be agreement between God’s temple and idols. Since ‘we are the temple of the living God’, we are not to involve ourselves with what is unclean. Living this way honours God’s welcome of us into his family (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).

## God's presence in the gift of tabernacle and temple worship

### Eden as the original tabernacle-temple

We read in the second creation account that there was 'no one to till the ground' until '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'. He was not left to till *any* patch of ground, since 'the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed' (Genesis 2:4–8).

This garden was full of abundant trees and had rich soil. Its river watered the garden as it flowed out of it, indicating that the garden was on a hill or mountain, and so suggesting it was a temple-site. Genesis 2:8–15, in describing Eden, begins and ends with the same theme: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'. To do this, and presumably to keep the LORD God's commandment not to eat the deadly fruit, he needed 'a helper as his partner', one of whom he declared, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken' (Genesis 2:16–24). The writer saw this as the way the LORD God wanted intimacy in marriage and family life to flourish.

The first creation account summarises these thoughts (Genesis 1:26ff). When we read in the second creation account of the couple hearing 'the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze' after they disobeyed God's instruction, we have a window into the intimacy intended for not only their original mutual communion and union, but also for their created relationship with God (Genesis 3:1ff).

Adam was made outside of Eden, outside of this special dwelling-place. God created his initial unfinished image outside Eden, completing it in the garden with his creation of Eve. If Eden is God's special dwelling place, then unfallen humanity entered God's gift of this garden as a gift. The gift by God of *his presence* and God's gift of *the place of his presence* are *only to be entered by his invitation and action*, as his gift. In Eden, there was special work for humanity to do in serving and worshipping God. Their original mandate was to be fulfilled in this way, with tilling and keeping parallel thoughts to filling and subduing.

This intimacy was not to be an 'other-worldly', super-spiritual, ungrounded mystical experience. It meant getting one's hands dirty by hard work, performed as the true worship of a thankful heart. It meant an abundant and rich vocation and a full and fruitful family and community life, as well as refreshing sabbath restfulness. While never apart from the presence of God, this worship was also never apart from the creation spoken into being by the divine presence, who gives himself to be with his humanity in his world.

### **Moses and the tabernacle**

After the Exodus, Israel was slow to learn the depth of God's deliverance and their need to leave behind the gods of Egypt and not follow the Canaanite deities. There was nothing holy about their evil in making the golden calf. They presumed by their grasping that they could invoke the presence of God in the image of an animal. They did this even when no creature was fit to be a companion such as man and woman would be together as God's image (Exodus 32:1ff; cf. Genesis 1:26ff, 2:18ff).

Moses knew his full dependency on God to enter the promised land, their new Eden. After destroying the golden calf, he wanted to know whom God would send with him, especially given the LORD's declaration that 'I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff necked people'. In response, the LORD promised that 'My presence will go with you and I will give you rest'. This reply uses the language of Genesis 1 and 2, and has Moses declare: 'For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct ... from every people on the face of the earth' (Exodus 33:1–23).

This account develops the thought that Eden is more than a *location* where the LORD dwells, it is a *people* in whom he dwells, and through whom creation comes to its fulfilment, destiny and glory. This glory is the effective revelation of his presence in his unbroken covenantal action across all time and history, as God explained to Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 34:5–7). Moses trusted God not to destroy them because of this revelation (Exodus 34:8).

The book of Exodus ends with the description of the cloud covering the tabernacle and the glory of the LORD filling it, preventing even Moses from entering it. It is easy to miss the significance of the contrast between the length of the account about the making of the golden calf and the subsequent orgy, and the detail given to the people's participation in making the tabernacle-tent of meeting and the glory of the LORD filling the tabernacle!

### **Solomon and the temple**

David was not permitted to build a temple because of his military career. He did decide it should be built in Jerusalem at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. This was the place where the LORD 'took note and relented' concerning his judgement on Israel for David's disobedience in conducting a census (1 Chronicles 21:15). God had sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem, but 'the LORD commanded the angel, and he put his sword back into its sheath' once David had obeyed the prophet Gad and presented burnt offerings after buying Ornan's threshing floor (1 Chronicles 21:27; cf. chapters 11, 21, 22, 28, 29; cf. 2 Samuel 5 to 7, 24).

The temple, like the tabernacle before it, was built after great mercy and grace were given to a sinful people. When it was built, Solomon 'conscripted forced

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labour out of all Israel', in great contrast to the free offerings given for the construction of the tabernacle in the Exodus and the divine gift of Eden in Genesis. Nonetheless, the fact that the 'house was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built', may reflect something of an awareness of Adam being made outside of Eden (1 Kings 5:13–6:7).

### **A new temple**

The prophets spoke of another new temple, aware of the false worship and idolatry of Israel as it fell from the glory days of David and Solomon (with all their faults). Ezekiel spoke of glory departing from the temple and yet still prophesied of a new temple with water 'flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple south of the altar' and forming into a great river with trees on its banks growing all kinds of food (Ezekiel 47:1ff, cf. 1:1ff).

Isaiah saw 'the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple' and wrote concerning false worship (Isaiah 6:1ff). Jeremiah lamented Israel's trust in 'these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD"' (Jeremiah 7:4ff). Habakkuk rested in the assurance that 'the LORD is in his holy temple' and prayed that 'all the earth keep silence before him' (Habakkuk 2:20).

Nehemiah supervised the reconstruction of Jerusalem after their return from Babylon. Some built and others protected (Nehemiah 4; cf. Genesis 2:15). Haggai rebuked the people for living in luxury while the temple remained in ruins. Haggai and Zechariah exalted in the future glory of a new temple where the LORD would come and dwell in their midst (Haggai 2:3–9; Zechariah 2:10–13, 3:1–4:14, 6:9–15, 8:1–23). God told the people through Haggai to 'take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear' (Haggai 2:4, 5).

Malachi spoke of 'the Lord whom you seek' suddenly coming to his temple to 'purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness' (Malachi 3:1ff).

### **Jesus and the temple**

This background is significant in understanding the accounts of Jesus cleansing the temple (Matthew 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–22). God's house was intended to be 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:7), a house where God would prepare praise for himself even from 'the mouths of infants and nursing babies' (Psalm 8:2). This outcome would eventuate because Jesus would, as the true temple, be raised from the dead, having brought all false worship to judgement in his cross (John 2:19).

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The writer of the book of Hebrews based thoughts on the eternal city and our present opportunity to offer praise-sacrifices to God on the fact that

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:12–16).

### Entering the new Eden

Jesus was crucified between two thieves, one who derided him while the other one was promised that he would be with Jesus that day in Paradise (Luke 23:39–43). Eden is entered only through this merciful judgement; a release only possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As suggested earlier, *the temple is not primarily a place but a people in communion with God*.

This understanding is consistent with Paul's testimony: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Paul emphasised these and similar thoughts in his later letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6:16–18).

The final description of the new Jerusalem is of a holy city where God dwells so fully that there is no temple in it (Revelation 21:22–27). Like Eden, the city comes from heaven as God's gift; unlike Eden, his people are already one with it. Something wonderful has happened in the place of the skull where Jesus died. Now the gates are forever open, the river is full of life, the trees all bear enough fruit to heal all the nations, and night is gone forever. This is God's promise to those who respond to the invitation of the Spirit and the Bride to come into the city by washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelations 7:13ff, 22:14ff).

Hence the great words of Isaiah are fulfilled. God inhabits eternity and dwells in 'the high and holy place', with heaven as his throne and earth his footstool,

*and also* [dwells] with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite. For I will not continually accuse, nor will I always be angry; for then the spirits would grow faint before me, even the souls that I have made (Isaiah 57:14–16, 66:1, 2, italics added).

### Conclusion

*God's presence in the gift of tabernacle and temple worship* means more than prayer and Bible study, more than meetings with songs and speeches! The river flows

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from Eden to the ends of the earth. Israel, as God's people, was commissioned to be a priest-kingdom for the nations, with eleven of the twelve tribes not merely providing support for the Levites, but fully engaged in the creational calling outlined in Genesis, renewed in the Mosaic covenant and later fulfilled in the new covenant under Jesus as priest-king.

Under Jesus, there is no separate twelfth tribe, simply 'a kingdom, priests serving [and worshipping] his God and Father, to [whom] be glory and dominion forever and ever'. This kingdom is free of the spiritual-temporal dualism and the sins that result from it, because of 'Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth ... who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood' (Revelation 1:4–8).

## **Living in God's holiness and love**

## The love that brings the kingdom

### We are called to live in God's love

When love is self-centred, true love grows cold (Matthew 24:12). Self-centred love readily perverts grace into lawlessness and licentiousness, denies 'our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ' and rejects God's kingdom (Jude 4). We are therefore urged 'to keep ourselves in the love of God'. God is not only able to keep us from falling, but to make 'us stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing' (Jude 14–25). Those who are ablaze with the love of God proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God throughout all the world (Matthew 28:18–20)!

Since we live in a universe that is sustained by the love of God, living in love is demanding of us, but not too difficult for us. God's love is for all humanity. God loves not only the righteous but the unrighteous. We are called to live in this love. We are called to live according to our created dignity. We are called to glorify God and image his glory. We are called to become 'perfect'; to reach completion and maturity. We are called to be like God (cf. Matthew 5:43ff; Luke 6:27ff, 10:27 where Christ is the 'perfect' 'good neighbour'). We are to love other people since it is God's pleasure to give us his kingdom, and the Father's kingdom is the realm of his love (Luke 12:22–34; Matthew 6:32, 33).

### The reign of love

The love that brings the kingdom is God's love. God's love confronts our human wills. God's love acts with authority: 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us ...' (1 John 4:10). The authority of the Son of God does not reside in him insisting on any 'selfish ambition or conceit', or even on his 'own interests' (Philippians 2:1–13). Jesus did not exploit, grasp or take, but emptied, gave and helped. Jesus exercised authority by attending to the 'interests of others' in pouring out himself in his death on the cross. Jesus revealed God's love, sovereignty and majesty in his suffering and death. *Because* he did what no one else will ever do (cf. Isaiah 52:13–15, 53:12),

God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus 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).

The life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (along with God's preparation for Jesus' coming through Israel and the prophets, and God's further action with and in the church) is only properly comprehended as God's exercise of his divine authority, and this in his love:

Q: Where in history do you see God's sovereignty?  
A: Where you see his love.

And vice versa!

Q: Where in history do you see God's love?

A: Where you see his sovereignty.

### **Seeing and sharing God's reign of love**

We see God's love when we see Christ crucified: God 'sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins'. Until seen personally, it is only noticed at a distance, as a mirage (cf. Luke 7:47 at Simon's house: 'the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little'). It is this love of Christ in forgiveness and reconciliation that urges us on, 'because we are convinced that one has died for all; [and] therefore all have died' (2 Corinthians 5:14). This is the love Abel knew and Cain did not know (1 John 3:11ff; cf. Luke 6:43–45).

Israel was called to express this truth about divine forgiveness as a holy nation, a chosen people and a kingdom of priests. They were not chosen because of their quantity or quality but because 'the LORD set his heart' on them and chose and loved them. God delivered them from Egypt in fulfilment of promises made to their ancestors (Deuteronomy 7:7–9):

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing (Deuteronomy 10:17–18).

The immediacy of this divine love was clear, and the people were to choose life in order that they and their 'descendants may live, loving the LORD your God' (Deuteronomy 30:11–20).

Centuries later, Paul identified similar themes when writing to churches about being God's community of love (Ephesians 4:15–24; 2 Corinthians 4:11, 12).

### **The love that brings unity and fullness**

The love that brings the kingdom unites us with the Father and the Son and the Spirit. This unity is evident in the intervention of the Son against all the difficulties we experience ('hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword'), and the issues that arise ('neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation') (Romans 8:31–39). This love is God's giving of his Son, the Son's giving of himself in his death, resurrection and ascension, and the gift of the searching intercession of the Spirit. We know this love as God's sons and daughters, as God's family, as bride to the Bridegroom, and as the community of the Spirit.

The love that brings the kingdom is the love that serves, suffers, redeems, gives and obeys. It is the love of God in Christ coming to us through the Spirit, and

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finding us as orphans, widows and outcasts (e.g. Psalm 68:1–6). It is God's love that finds us at enmity with God, disarms our defences and brings us home to God's paradise of holy love. This is the message of Luke 24:39–43 where the thief enters the renewed, new paradise with Christ, who 'loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Ephesians 5:2).

The forgotten poor man who saved a city by his wisdom must have expressed his wisdom in love, and his love for that city through his wisdom (Ecclesiastes 9:13–18). This poor man was rich in wisdom and love. He typified our calling as God's people to live in and share the love and unity that brings God's kingdom to fullness (cf. Jeremiah 29:1ff).

## The revival of the great love

### How much have we been forgiven?

The story of the nameless woman and Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36–50 has become timeless. Yet it is easy only to consider it in terms of a pious Pharisee whose harsh judgement of this woman and whose inadequate care of his special guest contrasted so poorly to the rich affection she expressed to Jesus. It was this woman who did a significant part of the role of a good host. It is not hard to be like Simon the Pharisee about Simon the Pharisee! Note that Luke does not tell us Simon's response to this incident (cf. Acts 5:17, 6:7).

To be asked about the extent of our love for Christ may cause us to ponder whether a revival of this love is appropriate. It may lead us to consider the effectiveness of our witness, to think about our devotional and moral life, and to consider our relationships with other people and our concerns for their needs. But Jesus is not asking these important questions here. He is simple and direct: how much has been forgiven?

The central issue in Jesus' story to Simon is forgiveness. Jesus told Simon of forgiveness of serious actual economic debt. He did not raise an irrelevant and unsubstantial issue. He spoke of a real human problem and indicated its solution. Our central crisis is guilt: not primarily with perceived or experiential guilt, but with actual personal guilt before God. In confronting the awful sin that has been committed against him and his humanity, God is not vengeful; divine wrath and judgement are restorative actions of God's love, holiness and righteousness. Death is at our door, and God has forgiveness in mind.

Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees contrasts significantly with his concern for this woman. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and his ministry to Zacchaeus emphasise similar themes, as does Jesus' concern for the woman in John 8:1ff (cf. Luke 18:9–14, 19:1–27, 20:9–19, 45–47; Matthew 23:1ff). There is a poignancy in the story Jesus told Simon. It is more than a story concerning a woman and Simon. It is a reminder regarding our own short-comings and about needs we may have for God's mercy and grace.

### What caused her to come to Simon's house?

The woman may have gone to Simon's house because Jesus had said or done something that spoke very deeply to her. She is described as 'a sinner' (cf. John 8:1ff). In considering her response, it may be helpful to ask what Luke tells us about Jesus' ministry in this part of his Gospel.

Luke 7 begins with the Centurion believing that Jesus, under God's authority, could heal his son. His faith amazed Jesus, and his son was healed. We then read of the funeral cortege of the only son of the widow of Nain. When Jesus commanded this young man to rise, he 'sat up and began to speak'. Luke tells us

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that ‘Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favourably on his people!”’ Unsurprisingly, ‘This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country’ (Luke 7:16, 17).

When John the Baptist heard what had happened, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask for confirmation as to whether Jesus was the promised Messiah. Jesus’ answer was significant:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me (Luke 7:22–23).

This is the same ‘good news of the kingdom of God’ that Jesus preached full of the power of the Spirit in his early ministry (Luke 4:14–44, 8:1, 16:16; cf. Isaiah 61:1ff). Forgiveness was central to his proclamation, as Jesus’ disciples testified, along with those whom Jesus healed, including the paralysed man brought to Jesus on a bed. Jesus’ declaration was clear and firm:

‘Which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or to say, “Stand up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the one who was paralysed – ‘I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home’ (Luke 5:23, 24).

Jesus’ message was consistent with his answer to the Pharisees’ complaint that Jesus ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners: ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance’. New wine needs new wineskins, especially when the bridegroom is at hand (Luke 5:1–39, cf. 1:77, 3:3)!

Luke also records Jesus blessing poor people with the presence of God’s kingdom and encouraging his disciples to love their enemies and to ‘do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return’. They were to be merciful as their heavenly Father is merciful and to withhold judgement and condemnation:

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:35–38).

We should therefore not be surprised that after John’s messengers had left that Jesus spoke about John as God’s prophetic messenger regarding the kingdom of God and the forgiveness of sins. Luke commented that ‘all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptised with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptised by him, the

Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves'. This unbelief was of course not limited to the Pharisees and the lawyers (Luke 7:24–35).

Luke followed the account of the woman at Simon's house by reaffirming Jesus' mission to go 'through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God', and by mentioning some of the women who accompanied the disciples as he travelled (Luke 8:1–3). It was in the context of this proclamation that he told the parable of the sower to 'a great crowd' of people who came to him from 'town after town' (Luke 8:4ff). Two conclusions stand side by side: those who hear the word of God produce abundant fruit, and those who know the depths of forgiveness love much (cf. Luke 10:1–42).

### **Who is this who even forgives sins?**

The question, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?', asked by those sharing hospitality at table with Simon, carries the correct implication that only a regal, divine person can give such a wonderful gift (Luke 7:49, cf. 5:21 where 'the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"'). It was precisely *this* one that the woman worshipped and thanked for giving her this glorious gift.

These references to forgiveness in Luke's Gospel, along with his inclusion of the Lord's prayer, provide a context for his account of the two thieves on the cross, and the declaration of one thief that they were suffering justly while Jesus was innocent. This thief's request that Jesus 'remember me when you come into your kingdom' is linked with Jesus' prayer that his Father forgive those who crucified him 'for they know not what they do' (Luke 11:1–13, 23:33–42).

The central question in the story of Jesus' visit to Simon the Pharisee's house is not how much the woman loved Jesus or how little Simon loved Jesus, but how much Jesus, with the Father and in the Holy Spirit, loved them both, and what this love meant for Jesus. 'Father forgive them ...' was not simply a cry under duress as the Messiah hung crucified, it was the essence of every breath he breathed, every action he took and every word he spoke.

Messiah's love, in the Father by the Spirit, did not need reviving: God's great love renewed her! Somehow, by the work of the Holy Spirit and the word of Jesus in the will of the Father, this love broke through to the woman who came to Simon's house (cf. the work of the Spirit in Luke 1:35, 41, 67, 2:25–27, 3:16, 4:1, 14, 18, 10:21, 11:13, 12:10–12, 23:46).

Note that she knew forgiveness *as* she 'stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair'. Her kissing of his feet and anointing them with ointment from her alabaster jar was not an act of penance or a plea for mercy.

Christ's comment to her that 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace' affirmed to her what *was already so* for her. Jesus' declaration to her that her 'sins are forgiven'

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was in the face of the comments by those at Simon's house. Whatever her evil and however horrible its memory, she could be sure about what *was* forgiven, not about what *needed* to be forgiven. This, all to be sealed at the cross, was hers immediately at that time and in that place. The story teaches us that the reminder of our sins is best seen as an unveiling of what God has already forgiven, and not as an accusation of our failure. The theological and ecclesiastical debate of Simon and his friends could not negate the royal decree of forgiveness decreed to her by Messiah that day!

### **What has God prepared for those who love him?**

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the richness of God's forgiveness was central to the apostolic proclamation (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 20, 5:31, 8:22, 10:43, 13:38, 26:18). The apostolic testimony about forgiveness and love was clear, as was their witness to God's promise to those whom he loves and who live in his love.

Paul's message to Timothy was that 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' and hence Paul was 'an example to those who would come to believe in [Jesus] for eternal life' (1 Timothy 1:15–17). Paul's letter to the Ephesians commences with Paul blessing

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love (Ephesians 1:3, 4).

Paul wrote to this church and the Roman believers of God's mercy and love in saving us by grace, and raising us up with Christ Jesus and seating us

with him in the heavenly places ... so that in the ages to come [God] might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4–7, cf. 1:3, 4, 3:14–19; Romans 5:1–5, 8:31–39; Galatians 2:19, 20; Colossians 3:14;

Paul believed that had 'the rulers of this age understood this ... they would not have crucified the Lord of glory'. Paul then declared that God, in his love, has revealed 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived' through the Spirit who 'searches everything, even the depths of God' (1 Corinthians 2:6–10).

John of Patmos wrote of Father-God being glorified and worshipped because of his liberating love in making God's people to be a priestly kingdom (Revelation 1:5–7; cf. 1 John 3:1–3, 1:9, 4:7–19). The warnings for the seven churches are firm reminders of the perils of not living in his love, while the promises are great encouragements to know the Lord who walks among the lampstands (Revelation 1 to 3, 19 to 22; cf. Hebrews 2 to 4, 6 and 10).

## The everlasting covenant of peace

### The new covenant and the Prince of Peace

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied of God keeping his ‘holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham’ (Luke 1:67–79; cf. Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22). He spoke of

- God’s favour (grace) in redeeming his people, and in doing this by a ‘mighty saviour’ from the house of David, according to the prophetic message and so consistent with the ‘mercy promised to our ancestors’.
- this redemption rescuing God’s people from their enemies and from the activities of all who hate them, so enabling them to ‘serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness all [their] days’. Knowledge of this salvation comes through the forgiveness of sins. God’s removing of the ‘shadow of death’ leads his people ‘into the way of peace’.

As Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey before his arrest, the adoring crowd recognised him as ‘the king who comes in the name of the Lord’. They declared ‘Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’. The Pharisees wanted silence – a silence that was to become a vitriolic tirade of angry abuse, demanding his crucifixion. Jesus replied that such silence would provoke the stones to call out! He wept over the tragedy that he saw awaited Jerusalem:

‘If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies … will crush you to the ground … because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.’ Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, ‘It is written, “My house shall be a house of prayer”; but you have made it a den of robbers’ (Luke 19:28–48).

The people did not ‘recognize the time of [their] visitation from God’ to God’s temple and sanctuary, to God’s kingdom and city, to God’s family and home. Jesus was saying that they did not identify or appreciate the things that were working to bring them peace. This helps explain why Jesus had earlier said he had not ‘come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!’ (Luke 12:51). His covenant and his kingship were of a completely different order, one before which human empires could not stand and against which they would be unable to prevail (Luke 10:17–24; John 12:12–50). A new kingship was at hand, and they did not know or recognise its character (John 3:1ff; Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 6:25–34; Mark 1:15; Luke 1:33, 4:43).

In their missionary travels, Jesus’ disciples knew something of what God’s kingdom meant *for Jesus* (Matthew 10:5–15). Jesus told them of divisions that would come because of their ministry, and that ‘the one who endures to the end

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will be saved'. They were not to 'fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell'. These divisions in religious and civic politics and in families would affect each person and their relationships and focus them on acknowledging or denying Jesus as the Son of his heavenly Father (Matthew 10:16–42).

Prior to his death Jesus spoke of both covenant (Matthew 26:26ff; Mark 14:22ff; Luke 22:14ff) and peace (John 14:27, 16:33). They are deeply linked. He promised peace, but its reality required him conquering the world. Defeating the world meant his body being broken for them and his blood being poured out for their forgiveness. His peace did not come from this world, but it is for all this creation; for everyone who receives his life-giving Spirit (Luke 24:36; John 20:19ff).

### God's gifts of peace and covenant

Reconciliation, renewal and proclamation result from God's gift of covenant peace. God's covenant relates to his conquest, as Zechariah prophesied. The elements of many ancient near-eastern political-military covenants are like those in Zechariah's prophecy (Luke 1:67–79). They describe the

- *conquests* which they recorded in their historical narratives and which mention their benevolence and goodness as conquerors.
- *obligations* those who were conquered had to their new rulers.
- *consequences* – blessings and curses – that eventuate, depending on the responses of those under their power.
- *confirmation* of the covenant before witnesses, including recording and proclaiming it and linking it with the conquering king-priests' cultuses.

Jesus' gospel proclaimed the arrival of God's kingdom and God's conquering king. God's covenant witness is to the peace he brings through his conquest. This peace includes:

- reconciliation with God and with each other, and the establishment in him of a new humanity living in his Spirit, according to the word of the Father that Jesus declared, with his people living in him in true unity and love (cf. Romans 5:1–11; Ephesians 2:11–22; 2 Corinthians 5:11–21).

This reconciliation involved Jesus' crucifixion and brought his people forgiveness, atonement, redemption and victory over God's enemies. 'I will be your God and you will be my people' was accomplished by the Son effecting the Father's divine decree: 'You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased' (Psalm 2; Isaiah 42; cf. Hebrews 10:1ff).

The reconciliation centres on and flows out of the word and works of the cross and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The result is human communities where God-given renewed relationships flourish in his grace,

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mercy and peace. The implications for governance and authority, for work and ministry, for family and marriage, and for worship and sabbath call for careful, humble obedience.

- restoration and renewal of all creation – whose stones would call out if his people fell silent (cf. Psalms 8, 85). Jesus' resurrection indicates that he has defeated death and broken evil power forever. It heralds his gift of justification and righteousness as the living dynamic of his sanctified people, who now worship the Father in Spirit and truth (cf. John 4:16–26; Romans 4:1–23, 8:18–39; Galatians 3:1–4:6).

The word of God at creation, with the Spirit moving over the deep, has in view the fulfilment of all things according to the divine glory. God's renewing action restores and completes what is already planned, and what is already planned has been set in place so that God's restorative grace will be seen in all its sovereign majesty.

- proclamation to each other, to all humanity, and to all creation (including the celestial powers) according to the essential nature of the covenant-God and his covenant action in unveiling the new heavens and new earth (cf. Acts 10:34–43; 1 Corinthians 1–3, 13; 2 Corinthians 4:1ff; Galatians 1; Philippians 2; 1 Peter 5; Revelation 2:1ff).

The proclamatory mission of the church is integrated with their life and suffering as God's people. They share his message to the 'ends of the earth' where the 'coastlands wait for his teaching' (Isaiah 52:10, 42:4). They communicate with everyone, including where spiritual powers work 'among those who are disobedient' (Ephesians 2:2). To attempt to 'free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death' using any means other than those of Jesus, the 'merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God', is self-defeating and a rejection of the action of Jesus as the priest-king of righteousness and peace, in the order of Melchizedek, (cf. Hebrews 7:1, 2, 12). As such he is the guarantee and mediator of the new and better covenant (Hebrews 8 to 13).

### **One shepherd, one flock, and a sure and steadfast hope**

All God's action centres in the death of Christ. In that atonement, God declared the righteousness that removes the world's sin and which seals God's forbearance, so announcing the coming consummation of all things (Romans 3:21ff; 1 John 2:2, 4:10). It is there that all the references to the everlasting covenant find their fulfilment in the divine gift of justification (Genesis 9:16, 17:7–19; 2 Samuel 23:5; 1 Chronicles 16:17; Psalm 105:10; Isaiah 24:5, 55:3, 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40, 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60, 37:26). Isaiah described the perfect peace that God gives in this justification (Isaiah 2, 11, 12, 26 cf. Romans 5:1ff).

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God's royal messenger proclaimed the end of careless peace pronouncements and the termination of restless wickedness by declaring peace, by bringing good news, by announcing salvation and by saying 'to Zion, "Your God reigns."'" (Isaiah 48:22, 52:7, 54:10, 55:12, 57:1–21, 59:8, 60:17; Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11–15). Isaiah prophesied God's love as more certain than creation:

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:10).

Isaiah 52 to 66 weaves references to God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel-Moses and David into prophecies regarding the fulfilment of God's creational and redemptive purposes.

Ezekiel contrasted God as the good shepherd to the false shepherds who led Israel. Ezekiel indicated the future certainty of God's people living securely with God's sanctuary in their midst (Ezekiel 34:1ff). Although false shepherds were self-indulgent and did not care for or protect their sheep, God declared that he would search for, locate his flock, rescue them and bring them home and feed them 'in all the inhabited parts of the land ... with good pasture':

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezekiel 34:13–16).

God will set one shepherd over them and 'will make with them a covenant of peace', sending 'showers of blessing' upon them. The people will 'know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the LORD God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the LORD God' (Ezekiel 34:25–31). After the vision of the valley of dry bones, God added that he would not only bring his people back from exile, but that he would unite them as one nation and cleanse them from their idolatry (Ezekiel 37:15–28).

In Revelation 11:15–19, 15:1–8, 21:1–8, the glory of the everlasting covenant of peace is seen, while the writer of Hebrews urged vigilance by worshipping God 'with reverence and awe', with 'each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises' (Hebrews 2:1ff; 6:1–20, 10:19–39; 12:1–29). The writer's prayer was that

the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, [would] make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever (Hebrews 13:20, 21).

## The bitterness of bondage

### Some bitter people

Simon the Sorcerer was full of bitterness and a captive to sin. He was arrogant yet held in awe. When the gospel came to Samaria, Simon wanted to buy from the apostles the ability to lay hands on people in order that they would receive the Holy Spirit. Although Simon believed and was baptised, he misunderstood the nature of the apostles' ministry when they laid hands on new believers. Peter, in pointing out to him that eternal blessings could not be bought with fading possessions, exposed Simon's deeper problem: Simon was full of bitterness and captive to wickedness (Acts 8:23). Hence Peter's command that Simon needed to repent and pray to God.

Paul, writing in response to hearing that the Corinthians accepted a rebuke from him, wrote that 'godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death' (2 Corinthians 7:10). There is a vast chasm between being drawn to repentance by seeing the riches of God's kindness, tolerance and patience, and being filled with remorse by seeing God as cruel, intolerant and impatient.

Jonah preferred the life of a bush over salvation of 120,000 Ninevites and their cattle (Jonah 4:6–11). Jonah was angry because of God's kindness! God's word of mercy was at that time less important to Jonah than his own angry cry of self-destruction.

Saul was caught in disobedience after offering a burnt sacrifice. He chased David and wanted to kill him. He visited a witch at Endor. His bitterness was exposed when he declared that 'God has turned away from me and answers me no more' (1 Samuel 28:15).

Esau toyed with the promises of God's covenant for his immediate pleasure. His bitterness had started in the womb where he fought with Jacob. Jacob was born grasping his twin brother's heel. Rachel loved Jacob in preference to Esau, while Isaac preferred Esau. Esau's bitterness surfaced when his father would not bless Esau after Esau had sold his birthright (Genesis 27:34).

### Bitterness as bondage

Nothing will prosper for long outside of God's holiness and love. Our experience of bitterness is measured not by our resentment, but by God's holiness and love (Deuteronomy 32:31–33). There is no easy exit to bitterness. It is a prison cell, a noose that strangles us to death, a poison that does not heal (2 Kings 14:26–27; Jeremiah 2:10–19). Our bitterness is always in the context of God's refusal to reward our self-seeking (Psalm 10; Romans 3:14). God is not passive (Zephaniah 1:12–18; Ezekiel 21:6; Amos 8:9–11; Jeremiah 9:15, 23:15). Even Wormwood

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does not make one third of the water bitter without an angel blasting his trumpet (Revelation 8:11, cf. Habakkuk 1:6).

Bitterness need not be forever. Consider Naomi's bitterness at losing her husband and two sons, and the LORD's provision for her through Ruth and Boaz and one of their descendants (Ruth 1:10, 4:13ff). Or Hannah, who, 'deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly' (1 Samuel 1:10, 2:6). Or Hezekiah, who realised that it was for his benefit that he 'had great bitterness' (Isaiah 38:17).

Israel learnt about bitterness as God's people (Lamentations 1:2, 4, 12, 3:15–19). The prophet saw an end to Rachel's bitter weeping over her children, declaring 'there is hope for your future' (Jeremiah 31:17). The people were to cease blaming their parents for eating sour grapes. One was to come who would open a fountain of grace to wash away tears of bitterness (Jeremiah 31:15–30; Zechariah 12:10–13:6). The Hebrew sages described adulteresses as being as 'bitter as wormwood' and by contrast portrayed wisdom as 'more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her' (Proverbs 5:4, 3:15, cf. 4:23, 8:11).

For Jesus to have taken the sour wine would have been to agree with the mocking of the soldiers that he should save himself by coming down from the cross. The truth was that he could not come down if he was to save anyone. Jesus was not bitter about bearing our bitterness. He later took the wine vinegar to wet his lips and declare the end of the reign of bitterness, victory over the bondage of bitterness, and the arrival of the kingdom of sweetness and freedom (Matthew 27:39ff; Mark 15:29ff; Luke 23:36ff; John 19:28–30).

How did he bear this bitterness? Paul tells us that 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Ephesians 5:2). The aroma of Mary's perfume when she poured out about two litres of undiluted perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair spoke of Christ's sacrificial love. Her perfume filled the whole house (John 12:3; cf. Psalm 45:8). Mary was prophesying of an aroma that would fill the universe.

We need not be angry at bitter waters like those of Mara (which were sweetened by the piece of wood God showed Moses), but refreshed at waters like those at the 12 springs and 70 palms of Elim (Exodus 15:22–27). It was at Mara that God 'made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test': He would be the God who heals those who listen carefully to his voice, unlike the Egyptians who had enslaved them. The *bitterness of bondage* becomes the *delight of deliverance*, not from bondage to autonomy, but from slavery to the fragrance of covenant freedom and life.

### **End bitterness!**

At its heart, bitterness is a refusal to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring or condoning something that is considered wrong. Nor does forgiveness require seeking reconciliation when the other party has rejected one's initiatives.

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Forgiveness means being committed to a positive future, with or without reconciliation, relying on the grace and mercy of God to provide a better story than the narrative that recalls trouble and provokes bitterness.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:31).

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled (Hebrews 12:15).

Make sure there is no-one whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison (Deuteronomy 29:18 NIV).

In listening to these exhortations, we are not to be fooled about ourselves or other people:

Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water (James 3:11)?

### Proclaim grace!

Our response is best aligned with the lover who exalts (and is not asleep or tardy): 'For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out' (Songs 1:2, 3, cf. 5:2ff). This response is not easy (Revelation 10:9; Ezekiel 3:1, 14). What is sweet to taste may turn sour in the stomach, as Jesus knew in his longing to gather Jerusalem's children (Luke 13:34–35), in his triumphal entry (Luke 19:41–44), and on his way to the cross (Luke 23:27–31).

Isaiah prophesied against those 'who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter' (Isaiah 5:20)! Jesus' death was not a mere *renaming* of bitterness and sweetness. It was a *remaking* of bitterness into sweetness and a warning to those who ignore and ridicule his sweetness about sinking into deep resentment.

Simon the Sorcerer was full of bitterness and a captive to sin. Paul the Apostle urged the Corinthian believers to be full of sweetness in the liberty of true life as captives of grace (2 Corinthians 2:14–17)! The joy and relief of being released from the bondage of bitterness is reflected in the hymn *Out of my bondage, sorrow and might.*<sup>29</sup> This liberation comes from the great exchange of Calvary, and suggests an additional song:

Into my bondage, sorrow, and night,

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<sup>29</sup> William T. Sleeper, 'Out of My Bondage, Sorrow and Night,' [http://hymnary.org/text/out\\_of\\_my\\_bondage\\_sorrow\\_and\\_night](http://hymnary.org/text/out_of_my_bondage_sorrow_and_night).

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Jesus, you came! Jesus, you came!  
With all your freedom, gladness, and light,  
Jesus, you came for me!  
Into my sickness with all your health,  
Into my want and with all your wealth,  
Into my sin and with all of yourself,  
Jesus, you came for me!

Into my shameful failure and loss,  
Jesus, you came! Jesus, you came!  
Into the scandalous shame of your cross,  
Jesus, you came for me!  
Into earth's sorrows with all your balm,  
Into life's storms with all of your calm,  
Into distress with jubilant psalm,  
Jesus, you came for me!

Into unrest and arrogant pride,  
Jesus, you came! Jesus, you came!  
With all your blessèd will to abide,  
Jesus, you came for me!  
Into myself to dwell with your love,  
Into despair from raptures above,  
Upward for aye on wings like a dove,  
Jesus, I am in you!

Into the fear and dread of the tomb,  
Jesus, you came! Jesus, you came!  
Out of the joy and light of your home,  
Jesus, you came for me!  
Into the depths of ruin untold  
With all the peace of your sheltering fold,  
Now for your glorious face to behold,  
Jesus, I am with you!

## The battle for the human soul

### We are the battleground

Two somewhat parallel Gospel stories set a context for some of the struggles we have in following Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, a Pharisee lawyer asked about the greatest law. Jesus answered him by saying to him:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:34–40).

Luke recorded a lawyer testing Jesus by asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus' response was that the lawyer should follow the Mosaic law of love (Luke 10:25–27). These passages define Jesus' kingdom manifesto; his primary mission and his vision for life in God's community.

Jacob's confession to God contrasts that of the Pharisees and the lawyer: 'I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.' Later, he wrestled with an angel who said that 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (Genesis 32:10, 28).

### God's weapons

What 'weapons' does God use in this battle for humanity? In what ways does God's love conquer the world and those who are in bondage to tyranny and/or tormented by evil?

#### *Creation: terrestrial and celestial*

Psalm 19:1–6, like Psalm 8, indicates that the heavens incessantly speak of God's glory and declare God's creativity:

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In Numbers 14:21 God says, 'as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD'. Habakkuk, in a similar vein, declares that God will defeat the proud and arrogant, and that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). The angelic testimony was: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' (Luke 2:14). God created all things with his covenant purposes and promises in mind.

### *Redeemed humanity*

From Abel onwards, prophets have been a key part of the battle for the human soul. Jesus spoke of this when he said the religious leaders had rejected their witness ‘from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar’ (Matthew 23:35). These prophetic testimonies were not given by isolated individuals; they were personal testimonies among a people whom God had chosen as ‘a priestly kingdom and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6; cf. Psalm 2).

God’s redeemed people are a prophetic, priestly and royal people who share in the battle for the human soul as those who have already been defeated but are now victorious! This is the thrust of Peter’s letter: ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Peter 2:9). Paul also made this clear (Romans 10:14–18).

### *God himself*

Isaiah described the people’s situation as utterly desperate. They were under God’s judgements for having not only lost the battle for their own souls, but for having lost the battle to be with God in his battle for humanity: ‘He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him’ (Isaiah 59:16, 63:1–6).

Paul argued the same way in Romans 8:31ff. The intercession described in this passage brings the defeat and demise of all who oppose God (cf. Revelation 19:11ff). God battles for humanity in very different ways from what we would expect. He wins the battle for the human soul in his own Son. His Son wins the battle by the Spirit. We see this in Jesus’ temptation, in his ministry, in Gethsemane and at Calvary. The author of Hebrews described Jesus’ ministry in terms of Jesus being God’s high priest and the ‘source of eternal salvation for all who obey him’ (Hebrews 5:1–10).

John told how Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was not understood. Only someone given a revelation like Isaiah’s, who ‘saw the Lord’ in his temple, could understand (John 12:16, 37–41). This was true for Jesus’ disciples, even though Jesus had explained to them that more than a triumphal entry would be needed to conquer the nations and reveal the full glory of the kingdom of God. Only in Jesus being as a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying – and bearing much fruit – would hearts be conquered. Only when he was ‘lifted up’ would all people be drawn to him and so to his Father (John 12:24–33).

### **Our weapons (against God)**

In the final analysis, the only weapon we have against God is unbelief. Unbelief is our refusal to hear his word and to receive his Spirit (Revelation 2:7, etc.). Jesus

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explained that the word of *salvation* – which he is and which he speaks – becomes the judgement of those who reject him and do not hear his word (John 12:44–50).

Holding ‘down the truth in unrighteousness’ is the first and final weapon that we use against God (Romans 1:18, 19). This is what the ‘fool’ does who ‘says in his heart’ that there is no God who cares or acts for the welfare of the vulnerable (Psalm 14:1–7).

This unbelief is best understood as the deceitfulness of sin. It is a weapon against God that God’s people are warned against using (Hebrews 3:12–15; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:12. See also Deuteronomy 32:4; Jeremiah 9:5–9, 23, 24; 1 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Peter 2:22, 3:10; 1 John 1:8). Satanic powers only have power on this basis (Genesis 3:1, 2; Corinthians 4:4).

### ‘The strife is o’er, the battle done’

‘Love’s redeeming work is done’<sup>30</sup> at the cross.<sup>30</sup> The cross reveals the intercession and intervention of the triune God once for all in the person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18). ‘Love’s redeeming work’ now comes to us bringing the victory ‘that conquers the world’ (1 John 2:1, 2, 4:1–6, 5:1–5; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Revelation 2:7, etc.).

The battle for the human soul is God’s insistence on his own integrity across creation and throughout history. His holiness and love come face to face with all humanity in Jesus ‘who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). Jesus wins the battle and brings us into his eternal communion with the Father in the Spirit. The Eternal Community brings us into their Eternal Communion. They engage us in their battle not only for us, but for everyone (Revelation 7:13–17). Such strong, strong love!<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Wesley, ‘Love’s Redeeming Work Is Done,’ [http://hymnary.org/text/loves\\_redeeming\\_work\\_is\\_done\\_fought](http://hymnary.org/text/loves_redeeming_work_is_done_fought); ‘Christ, the Lord Is Risen Today,’ [http://hymnary.org/text/christ\\_the\\_lord\\_is\\_risen\\_today\\_wesley](http://hymnary.org/text/christ_the_lord_is_risen_today_wesley).

<sup>31</sup> *New Creation Hymn Book*, 30.

## Our times are in his hands

### Vanity and fullness

There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

In a similar way, Habakkuk questioned God judging Israel through Babylon (Habakkuk 1:1–4, 12–14, 2:1). While we may consider this matter intellectually or philosophically, it was an intensely personal question for the prophet. God's answer to Habakkuk was to affirm that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). This fullness would come about because God would treat people according to their faith (Habakkuk 2:4).

God declared to Jeremiah and Ezekiel that he, in his covenant with Israel, held each person accountable for their own sinfulness, and that his forgiveness was available to everyone. The same principles would determine the way God would deal with all nations (Jeremiah 31:27–37; Ezekiel 18:1ff).

When Paul spoke to the Athenians, he linked the nations' searching for God to the 'times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live'. Christ's death and resurrection are central to God's dealings with the nations, and the nations response to God's salvation (Acts 17:22–31).

Jesus' last word from the cross was 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (Luke 23:46; cf. Psalm 31:5). It was as if Jesus took Psalm 31 as his own:

Verses 1–5 describe the psalmist's cry for deliverance. He believed God had redeemed him even as he sought refuge in him.

Verses 6–8 tell of his trust in the LORD's love for him in not letting him be delivered into the hands of his enemies. His enemies were idolaters; his longing was for God's hand to complete his rescue.

Verses 9–13 describe the intensity of his sufferings, of those who schemed 'together against [him], ... to take [his] life'.

Verses 14–18 detail his declaration that the LORD was his God, and that his times were in God's hands – as were those of his enemies.

Verses 19–22 express his worship as he thanked God for wondrously showing 'his steadfast love to [him] when [he] was beset as a city under siege'.

Verses 23–24 exhort those who wait for the LORD to 'love the LORD', to be strong and let their hearts take courage, because God 'preserves the faithful'.

### **Our lives are in God's hands**

The psalmist was not locked into a mechanical, empirical world of cause and effect over which neither he, nor God, had any control. He did not believe he was part of a chaotic, existential world of unrelated, uncoordinated events. Nor did he think the universe was dictated by abstract rules or ideas that were beyond any understanding. The ancient songwriter described a world with its 'where', 'when' and 'how' being in the hands of a God who was full of steadfast love and who redeemed his people.

By saying his times were in God's hands he affirmed that God was not in his hands! He was stating that he was not God, and that he was not in final control of his life. He believed that his dignity and identity were determined personally by God, and not by fate or chance, and that God cared about his relationships with those around him.

Similarly, God's answer to Habakkuk in verse four of chapter two shows the covenantal way in which God cares for his people:

Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith (NRSV).

Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith (RSV).

No wonder the prophet was in awe of God:

O LORD, I have heard the report of thee, and thy work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy (Habakkuk 3:2).

God has remembered mercy *in* his wrath. This divine memory is because his wrath is his insistence on his mercy! In times of difficulty, it is best to respond with the prophet: 'But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him' (Habakkuk 2:20).

### **His hands are nail-pierced**

Our times are in nail-pierced hands. God put himself and his times into Jesus' human, blood-stained hands in order that that we may know that we are in God's hands; that we may know that the 'times of [our] existence and the boundaries of the places where [we] would live' are secured by God (Acts 1:8, 17:26).

Peter declared on the day of Pentecost that Jesus was 'handed over ... according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. ... But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power' (Acts 2:23–24).

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Preaching after healing the crippled beggar, Peter said they had rejected ‘the Holy and Righteous One’ and had ‘killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead’, and that

In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:14, 18–20).

After being released by the rulers, the believers prayed for boldness:

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27, 28).

It is this mercy which the thief wanted to receive from Christ (Luke 23:39–43; cf. Ezekiel 18). It is this mercy that unlocks all history, and by which all humanity lives or dies (Revelation 5:1–5). It is this mercy that the martyrs cry out for from under the altar (Revelation 6:9–11). And it is this mercy that ensures the coming of Christ to his creation (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20). The book of Revelation explains that God is not delayed from his purposes. He is ‘trustworthy and true’, he is the ‘first and the last, the beginning and the end’, and he brings us to ‘share in the tree of life and in the holy city’ and its worship (Revelation 22:1–21).

Not only are our times in his nail-pierced hands, we can know him and learn about interpreting the signs of the times in which we live (Matthew 16:1–4; cf. Jeremiah 8:7; Ecclesiastes 3:1ff). We can be sure that we – with our own times and places – are in the hands of the slain Lamb who alone is worthy to unlock the scroll of history. He unlocks that scroll according to who he is, with the Father and in the Holy Spirit: who he is as ‘the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’. This is the ministry of our Saviour and Lord, the one ‘who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood’ (Revelation 1:5).

## Living in holiness – delight in the law of God

### Living in holiness: holy Eden

Genesis 3:8 describes the LORD God walking in Eden after Adam and Eve had disobeyed his command by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In contrast to their futile attempt to hide ‘from the presence of the LORD God’, Revelation 21:22–27 describes nations walking by the glory of God and the Lamb being the lamp of the glory of God.

The LORD God sent Adam and Eve out of Eden and placed cherubim and ‘a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Genesis 3:22–24). The gates of the New Jerusalem, by contrast, are always open. The nations bring their glory and honour into the holy city and only those whose names are in the ‘Lamb’s book of life’ enter it (Revelation 21:27; cf. 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 15).

In Jesus’ story of being the good shepherd and the gate to the sheepfold, the conflict introduced in Genesis and the victory described as being achieved in Revelation are engaged. Jesus protects his flock from the evil purposes of the thief who ‘comes only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:1–18).

But who may enter the new holy city?

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls  
to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully (Psalm 24:3ff).

The cleanliness by which blessings come is ‘from the God of their salvation’. The basis of their purity is clear: ‘Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob’. Those who seek God for salvation enter his sanctuary (Psalm 24:3–6). Those who clean up their houses but do not know the king of glory may end up in even worse situations (Psalm 24:7–10; Matthew 12:43–45; Luke 11:24–26).

Isaiah similarly prophesied of an era when nations would ‘stream’ up ‘the mountain of the LORD’s house’ and would want to learn the LORD’s ‘ways and ... walk in his paths’ (Isaiah 2:1–3; cf. Genesis 2:10 where rivers flow from Eden – which is represented as a temple by its elevated position).

### Delighting in the law of God

Understanding the ‘law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ is central to delighting in God’s law (Romans 8:1ff). What changes a scoffer into a saint? How is person, let alone a nation, changed from despising the way of the LORD to delighting in his law, from taking the path of sinners and being driven away like chaff on a windy day to being ‘like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper?’ How is someone changed from not standing in the judgement, from perishing under

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the inspection of God, to being in ‘the congregation of the righteous’ and in the care of the LORD (Psalm 1)?

This work of God condemned sin and so revokes condemnation and brings Spirit-led life by releasing us from ‘the law of sin and death’ (Romans 8:1–4). Paul went on to describe the difference between hostility to God and pleasing him by willingly submitting to his law – to this Spirit-law! This work of the Spirit brings all the transforming power of the cross of Christ to us, so doing what was otherwise impossible. The ‘law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ is the working of God in and through Christ for our salvation.

Hebrews 10:1–10 speaks of Jesus as both priest and sacrifice, and of his coming to do God’s will. The law and its sacrifices, and all the priestly ministry that goes with them, cannot, of itself, take away sins. But, in Christ, all the goals of the law, all the delights of God, and all the joyful obedience of true humanity come together! Psalm 40, quoted in this passage, amplifies the substance of doing God’s will: ‘I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart’ (Psalm 40:8; cf. Galatians 5:22, 23).

The writer of Hebrews explained what this means. Christ’s single self-offering according to God’s sovereign will accomplished what no priestly offerings could achieve. Christ’s victorious self-offering

perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,’ he also adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’ (Hebrews 10:10–17).

The sanctuary of God can now be entered ‘by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)’. As ‘we have a great priest over the house of God’ we can authentically and confidently approach God with ‘hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and … bodies washed with pure water’ (Hebrews 10:19–22).

Christ is the new and living way into Eden, into the sanctuary of God, by his blood! Those in the sanctuary are true worshippers (cf. Hebrews 2:5–18, 8:1ff). Their hearts’ delight is in God’s law!

This delight in God’s law and in having access to God’s sanctuary aligns with Paul’s appeal about offering ourselves as living sacrifices in ‘spiritual worship’. This is the way God’s mercies transform our minds and enable our hearts to understand and obey ‘what is good and acceptable and perfect’ (Romans 12:1, 2).

### **According to God’s likeness in righteousness and holiness**

In Ephesians 4:17 to 5:14, Paul wrote of ‘the life of God’ that ‘you learned from Christ’. They had ‘heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus’.

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They were not to grieve the Holy Spirit with whom they were marked ‘with a seal for the day of redemption’. They were ‘members of one another’ and were instructed to be ‘imitators of God’. This meant that ‘as beloved children’ they were to ‘live in love’: ‘Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true’. To be light rather than darkness is 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’. Their ‘inheritance [is] in the kingdom of Christ and of God’.

This transformation does not result from our initiative and does not diminish our responsibilities or opportunities! God has forgiven us in Christ who ‘loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Ephesians 5:1, 2). Hence Paul insists that we

must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Ephesians 4:17–19).

Thanksgiving to God replaces the idolatry and greed of ‘your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts’. Anger, quarrelling, drunkenness, idleness and bitterness are a sad harvest with ‘the wrath of God [coming] on those who are disobedient’ (Ephesians 4:20–5:6).

### Sharing God’s plan for his creation

Peter proclaimed abundant grace and peace to those ‘who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’ (1 Peter 1:1, 2). We are to be mentally alert for action and well-disciplined because of this work of God in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. All our hopes are ‘on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring ... when he is revealed’. Just as the God who called us is holy, so we are to be holy in everything we do (1 Peter 1:13ff).

By God’s calling and in God’s mercy, we are set apart to share in his plan for his creation as

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9, 10).

Peter later urges that ‘those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good’ (1 Peter 4:19).

**With God in his world**

## Christ our conquering king

### Christ conquers, and is with his people in his conquest

Christ, and his role in the battle, is central to the book of Revelation. The book commences with God revealing to him what will happen in the future. Jesus, along with the things which ‘must soon take place’, is revealed to his servants (Revelation 1:1–16). It is his grace that envelops the beginning and the end of the book; an ending in which he affirms his imminent coming (Revelation 1:1–6, 22:20, 21).

Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead (Revelation 1:18). He is the ‘firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth’ (Revelation 1:5). He reveals to his servants – to his Father’s royal priests – what God has shown him. This revelation expresses his liberating glory and love, and his grace and peace (Revelation 1:1–6). He promises full participation in his triumph to those who ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26–29, 3:5–6, 11–13, 21–22). This includes the revelation of ‘one seated on the throne’ (Revelation 4:1–11, esp. 4:2).

Christ is ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David’, and is alone worthy of opening the scroll and breaking its seven seals (Revelation 5:5). He does this as the ‘Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth’ (Revelation 5:6). The Lamb is worshipped by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders because he has ‘ransomed for God saints’ from across all humanity and has ‘made them to be a kingdom and priests’ serving God and has destined them to ‘reign on earth’ (Revelation 5:1–14, esp. 9, 10).

When he opens the first six seals, judgements cover the earth. At the same time the servants of the living God are sealed (Revelation 7:4). Although they are not protected from suffering as participants in his conquest, they are sealed for eternal life in God’s temple (Revelation 6:9–11). Jesus is the ‘Lamb at the centre of the throne’ who shepherds his sheep, restoring them when they ‘come out of the great ordeal’ (Revelation 6:1–7:17, esp. 6:14).

With the Lamb’s opening of the seventh seal, answers to the saint’s prayers come through the seven trumpets (Revelation 8:1–5). Following the pattern with the opening of the seals, six trumpets declare judgements (Revelation 8:6–9:21), with a subsequent promise that when the seventh trumpet is blown ‘the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets’ (Revelation 10:1–22, esp. 10:7). John was a prophet (cf. Revelation 10:11), and so linked somehow with the two witnesses whose death and resurrection herald the beginning of Messiah’s reign. Christ’s reign ends the domination of the worldly empires which have raged against God and sought to ‘destroy the earth’ (Revelation 11:1–19, esp. 11:18).

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The snatching away and taking ‘to God and to his throne’ of a son is at once the declaration of Christ’s authority and of his defeat of the accuser. This central chapter declares that Jesus, the Messiah-Lamb, while having eternal being, comes from among the people of God and rules from the throne of God.<sup>32</sup> It is his people who, because of ‘the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony’, conquer the dragon-serpent (Revelation 12:1–17, esp. 12:5, 11, 17). The testimony of the people of God is Jesus’ testimony within them, a witness to them enabling them to keep his commandments.

As the dragon and the two beasts prepare for their final onslaught, their hideousness is exposed (Revelation 13:1–18). By contrast the Lamb, the Son of Man, with the Spirit, declares the final fall and failure of Babylon. This involves the ‘endurance and faith of the saints’ as they ‘hold fast to the faith of Jesus’. They are assured by the Spirit that ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds will follow them’ when they ‘die in the Lord’ (Revelation 14:12–14).

Their singing of a new song learned from ‘a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of thunder; … like the sound of harpists playing on their harps’, and ‘the song of Moses and the Lamb’ accompanies the opening of God’s temple in heaven (Revelation 14:1–5, 15:1–4, cf. 1:15). The ark of God’s covenant is within this temple, which is also described as the tent of witness (Revelation 11:19, 15:5, 6). After this proclamation of the ‘eternal gospel’, seven angels come from the temple with the final seven plagues and seven bowls which complete the wrath of God upon the evil trinity and their world system – called Babylon the great (Revelation 14:6–12, 15:7–18:24).

This battle is fierce, with ‘the woman … drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus’. Evil powers make ‘war on the Lamb, and the Lamb [conquers] them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful’ (Revelation 17:6, 14).

Victory is celebrated at the marriage supper of Christ, the ‘Faithful and True’ bridegroom-warrior of his people (Revelation 19:16). His judgements are seen to be true and just, as he alone has avenged his servants by judging ‘the great whore who corrupted the earth’ and by striking down the nations as ‘the Word of God’ (Revelation 19:2, 13). The sufferings of the people of God, the bride of the Lamb, are now seen as the way the bride has been prepared for this celestial marriage (Revelation 19:1–16).

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<sup>32</sup> The series of sevens in Revelation provides one structure for reading the book, as in Don Priest, *Living in Love and Freedom* (Printed by Openbook Howden, St Marys, South Australia, 2017), 67–124. The focus on the church as God’s people in the early and latter chapters suggests something of a chiastic structure as well. There is little doubt in my mind that reading Revelation as a literal sequence has significant weaknesses. Chapter 12 is certainly an axis around which we can understand the Jesus-narrative in the early and latter chapters.

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Following the capture of the dragon, the beast, and the second beast, the false prophet, and details about the millennium, comes the ‘first resurrection’ and the ‘second death’ (Revelation 20:5, 6). The promise to those who ‘hold the testimony of Jesus’ (which ‘is the spirit of prophecy’) and ‘worship God’ is that they are ‘blessed and holy’ (Revelation 19:10, 20:4, 6). They ‘share in the first resurrection’, ‘the second death has no power’ over them, and ‘they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him’ (Revelation 20:5, 6, cf. 2:11, 20:14, 21:8).

Finally, the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven to earth as the bride of the Lamb. There is no temple in this city because ‘its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb’ in all their enthroned glory. Only those whose names are ‘written in the Lamb’s book of life’ enter the city (Revelation 21:1–22:7, esp. 21:22, 27).

The book of Revelation concludes with Christ affirming that he – ‘the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star’ – is coming soon! The testimony of the Spirit and the bride affirms both his coming and that ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus [is] with all the saints’ (Revelation 22:16, 21).

The battle is personal; it is not merely between opposing forces. The battle is the triune action of God in Christ, in and with his people by the Spirit, against the evil dragon, beast and false prophet, along with those enslaved to them. All is resolved according to God’s being and purpose, and this in Christ, who is never separated from God or his people.

Christ fights unseen and seen opposition to secure his creation for its, and his people for their, eternal destinies. Knowing this truth helps us comprehend our own stories and battles. As surely as evil empires battle against ‘the LORD and his anointed’, they battle him for his creation (Psalm 2).

All is at stake. Satan seeks to overthrow and replace God as creator, to de-throne God and capture his creation and all humanity, and so achieve a perverse fulfilment of the original creational mandate. Against this rebellion, Christ reigns as Lamb and fulfils all God’s purposes (Revelation 1:1ff, 4:1–11).

### **Christ’s faithful testimony fights and wins the battle**

Jesus is faithful to his Father’s word to him. He is God’s word, witness and testimony, and he gives his word to all humanity and all celestial creatures (Revelation 1:1–6, 3:14, 15:5, 19:10, 11, 21:5, 22:16). It is this word that fulfils Psalm 2 by ruling the nations ‘with a rod of iron’ (Revelation 19:15).

The people of God are those who know that the battle is one of faith. They ‘keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus’ (Revelation 14:12, 13:10). Christ’s faith is to be lived in. It is not merely an example to follow. God’s people know that the battle is against the conflict generated within the Babylonian system. Caring for others is against selfish gratification (Revelation 18:1–24). God’s people know something of the intensity of the battle (Revelation 13:10).

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They know that their testimony to Jesus is their participation in the divine discourse that disarms and defeats the powers of darkness (Revelation 1:9, 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 17, 17:6, 19:10, 20:4). This witness is their life as the royal, priestly and prophetic people of God (Revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6).

Their testimony is seen in their not clinging to life even in the face of death, of remaining in love and not succumbing to hate, of accepting martyrdom rather than seeking heroism, of giving and letting go rather than grasping and hanging on, of holiness and glory rather than profanity and shame (Revelation 1:5, 12:11). They look for residency in the ‘beloved’ and ‘holy’ city, rather than in the harlotry and impurity of Babylon (Revelation 19:2, 20:9, 21:2).

Christ’s testimony is the effective action of God’s grace, peace, love and glory. The revelation of heavenly worship in chapter 4 finds its fulfilment in the life of the new Jerusalem.

### **Christ is Lord in the conflict now**

Harmagedon (Armageddon) is a significant assembly point, but little is said of a detailed battle, probably because of the faithful witness already borne by Christ through his people in the Spirit. From this viewpoint, the final, climactic battle is fought daily in all situations and generations as God’s people bear their witness in the Spirit to the testimony given by Christ to his God and Father. When the last confrontation occurs, Christ will have already well and truly won the battle in, with and through his people!

These events ‘must soon take place’. The ‘time is near’, and ‘there will be no more delay’ because God has decreed that the devil’s time is short (Revelation 1:1, 3, 2:16, 3:11, 10:6, 12:12). While Christ’s coming is yet to come, we are to live now knowing that he is not absent from his creation, but very present to it (Revelation 22:6, 7, 12).

He is, in this sense, continually coming – and will do so until he comes with

the clouds; [and] every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. … [Jesus the Messiah] who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 1:7, 8, 22:20).

Our response is surely that of the Spirit and the bride who look forward to Christ’s coming, and who urge ‘everyone who hears’ to join with them in anticipating and asking for Christ to come. Their invitation is clear: ‘And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift’ (22:17).

## God's love and the nations

### In the glories that the nations bring into the New Jerusalem

The glories that the nations are described as bringing into the New Jerusalem, a city without a temple 'for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb', arrive as the direct result of 'him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and [who has] made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever'. The 'river of the water of life' and the 'tree of life' with its monthly fruit crops and health-giving leaves provide ample invitation to those who want to participate in the city's life, culture and worship (Revelation 21:22–22:2; 1:4–6).

The nations, in the context of this goal, have always been God's concern:

- God's covenants have the nations in mind.
- Jesus' birth and ministry narratives contain references to the nations, such as those relating to the wise men (Matthew 2:1ff), Simeon (Luke 2:25ff), the centurion (Matthew 8:5ff), the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21ff), and the Greeks who visited Jesus (John 12:20ff).
- Paul's messages involved the nations, including his preaching at Athens (Acts 17:22–31) and his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 15:7–29).

A survey of Isaiah 2:1–4, 60:1–11, 61:1ff and Revelation 15:3, 4 suggests that the nations' glories relate to their hearing and obeying the word of God by the grace of God, to their sharing in worshipping God and so being sanctified, and to their restoration to full humanity by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Two consequences of this hearing, sharing and being restored are evident

### In the grace poured through his Messiah-Servant

*The glory which the nations bring into the eternal city is the glory of his grace.*

The nations are not able to enter the eternal city without modifying their actions and thoughts since 'nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life' (Revelation 21:27). Every aspect of the action of God's beloved Messiah-Servant is necessary for nations to be purified and so be able to enter the eternal city. God's chosen, beloved servant, 'in whom [his] soul delights' is upheld by God's power and strength through his Spirit. His victory is his truthful non-violence. It is his refusal to yield to opposition in exercising his justice and sharing his wisdom and insights (Isaiah 42:1–9; Luke 3:22).

God strengthens his servant not only to 'restore the survivors of Israel', but to be a 'light to the nations, that [his] salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:1–7; cf. Luke 2:29–32). Isaiah's prophecy suggests that God's power can

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raise his suffering servant from the dead. Although his servant's appearance was marred 'beyond human semblance', 'he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him'. Although 'cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people ... he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days'. God 'will allot him a portion with the great' in response to him pouring 'out himself to death' and being 'numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

God's promises to the nations are according to his own counsel and wisdom and are achieved by his own authority and power. They reach the nations through the sufferings of God's messianic servant. It is the power of the slain Lamb that opens the highway for the redeemed to come to truly worship God in the full flow of covenant mercy (Isaiah 51:11; 54:9, 10; 59:20, 21; 61:5–9).

God's everlasting love, grace and faithfulness come to the nations through the one to whom the Spirit of the LORD is given. Under, in and through him, all the nations bring their glory to the new Jerusalem and participate in the worship that belongs to the new heavens and the new earth.

Through his Messiah-Servant, God will bring to his temple those from other nations 'who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants'. To be aligned with Israel's God involves keeping the sabbath sacred and accepting God's covenant. Everyone who does this will be welcome and full of joy in the LORD's sanctuary for it 'shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 56:6, 7).

This welcome to the temple and city of God will be like a lighthouse beacon signalling that God saw 'that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene' and so had won the victory by himself:

He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle (Isaiah 59:17).

The city of God's gates and the temple of God's entrances will always be open so that nations can bring 'their wealth, with their kings led in procession' (Isaiah 60:11). Rather than hostility and corruption, God

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 60:17, 18).

### **In his people going to the nations to proclaim his grace**

*The nations know God's love from his people going to them in the grace poured out through his Messiah-Servant. The glory which the nations bring into the eternal city is the glory of this grace heard from God's people going to the nations.*

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Paul wrote of how God ‘was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the [nations]’. Paul’s claim was that God’s revelation *to* him and *in* him was with a view to Paul proclaiming Christ to the nations. Paul declared himself alive in Christ *for that purpose*: ‘the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Galatians 1:15, 16; 2:20, 21; cf. Isaiah 42:1; Romans 15:7–9).

Jesus commissioned his disciples after his resurrection by anointing them with the Holy Spirit. Their receiving the Spirit meant he was sending them in the same way that his Father had sent him (John 20:21, 22). As God’s anointed servant, he was strengthening them by the Spirit, and not from their own resources. Of themselves they were weak, but under his command they would be strengthened to share in his going to the nations with and in them.

This is the way God ‘who does not faint or grow weary... gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless’. Those lacking power who ‘wait for the LORD’ have sustaining strength for their assigned callings. God’s servant, by the Spirit, ‘mounts up with wings like eagles’, and through him renewed strength comes to God’s people in Israel and other nations (Isaiah 40:28–31; cf. Exodus 19:4).

This renewal comes by refining judgement. God calls the nations to account: ‘Listen to me in silence, O coastlands; let the peoples renew their strength; let them approach, then let them speak; let us together draw near for judgment’. The magnificent result is that ‘the coastlands wait for his teaching’ (Isaiah 41:1; 42:4) and that God’s promises are fulfilled:

I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, ... I will send survivors to the nations, ... to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations (Isaiah 66:18–24).

Jesus’ commission to ‘make disciples of the nations’ has its emphasis on witnessing ‘to the ends of the earth’ because Jesus’ disciples were to ‘receive power when the Holy Spirit [came] upon’ them (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). If we, as God’s Servant’s servants, are anointed by the Holy Spirit to go to the nations, then we are going to them as Jesus goes to them. Similarly, we will be anointed by the Spirit if we go to the nations as Jesus goes to them.

There is no discontinuity between the actions of the servant of Isaiah 40ff and the way the Son, who is now in glory at the right hand of the Father, rules the nations today. His work *in us* is consistent with what he himself did (cf. John 1:11–18). Just as the servant in Isaiah embraced the sufferings and hopes of Israel, so Jesus fulfills his plan and purposes through the church, the redeemed people of God, *and through their sufferings and hopes*.

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## God's fatherhood – the heart of the family

### **By creation**

God not only reflects his own being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit when he creates humanity in his image (cf. Genesis 1:27), God's image also reveals the way God relates to the humanity God creates. It should not surprise us, then, that humanity reflects God through parents and children, and that humanity is fulfilled by relating to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The richness of biblical descriptions of families and marriage, and of the redeemed community of the people of the living God, living within God's garden-city-paradise, displays this wonderful reality.

It is helpful in this context to consider God's fatherhood and human families. It is necessary to recognise the differences between God's fatherhood and human parents, and to acknowledge our interdependencies and imperfections as parents and children. Luke recorded Jesus saying that God the Father – unlike parents or any authority – acts 'by his own authority' (Acts 1:6–8).

God's love and holiness are revealed in and by God's creation, and so are known in and by humanity. The love and holiness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are not dictated by another being or reality but come to us to embrace us into God's own life (2 Peter 1:4). Just as God creates humanity and creation as the realm of his external relationships, he creates humanity not only to relate to God and other people, but to relate to the physical universe in which we live.

We are created as God's family to live in God's home. Deuteronomy 10:12–22, Jeremiah 7:5–7 and Malachi 3:5 are examples of passages that tell of God's care for orphans, widows and strangers (cf. James 1:27; 1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11). These passages, and others like them, remind us of our creational identity and vocation, and of God's goals in renewing creation and achieving his purposes.

### **By redemption**

John's statement about Jesus as the Word in John 1:10–18 is simultaneously wonderful and tragic. John described creation as being created through 'the Word' and this Word being present but unrecognised in the world:

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

The Word's glorious presence among humanity was 'as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth'. His fullness revealed that 'the Father's heart' wanted to make

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him known as his Word-Son, and that as the Father's Son, he wanted to reveal the true nature of Father-God including their eternal unity.

The Father's heart is seen in his Son's life and ministry. Jesus knows his Father by the Holy Spirit (John 3:36) and sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts so we know the Father through the Son (John 14:15–20). The Father does not love us at arm's length from some remote celestial eternity but embraces us by his Spirit within his love of his Son. The Son, who is prophet, priest and saviour, revealed the Father and brings God's family to maturity in and with creation.

All of creation awaits liberation. This freedom can never be known other than through the cross. The door to eternity is not at the end of or start of history; it is in its centre and its shape is cruciform. The cross of Jesus tells of our adoption into God's family; an adoption which creation is structured to anticipate, and regarding which creation anguishes until it is realised. The cross informs us of God's victory over evil and the way God accomplishes it. The cross reveals that the Spirit's work within Jesus relates both to Jesus' intercession 'for the saints according to the will of God' and to the witness of the Spirit to this triune action. It is this liberation into the 'freedom of the glory of the children of God' that is secure against all the enemies that would 'separate us from the love of Christ' (Romans 8:18–39).

Jesus' sufferings show us the divine unity by drawing us into God's own relationships as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a deep mystery of God's being that we only know God's abundant goodness and grace as a redeemed and reconciled humanity. The new creation is the great harvest of God's redemption. The final glory of this creation is therefore the saving atoning work of the crucified Christ by which we are adopted into God's family and God's creation is renewed.

### Responses

Some of the implications of God's creational and redemptional purposes are explored in the companion study, *The family in universal action*. Several initial responses may help set the context for that study.

The Father relates to the Holy Spirit with the Son. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Within human families there is more than a parent relating to a child; the communion between or separation of parents (for whatever reason) relates to children. Relationships within human families affirm that creation is not some passing shadowy apparition, but prophesy that the dust from which God formed us and into which he breathed his life-giving Spirit has divine purpose and nourishment. To lose faith in God's grace to care for our families is to declare him unable or unwilling to recreate his universe through the cross and resurrection of his Son and the ministry of the Spirit.

The tragic consequences of sin are that dead relationships can so dominate our domestic circumstances that families become defined more in terms of fallen difficulties than by the fruits of redeeming and renewing grace. Revelations are

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needed of the created image of God and of the renewed, glorified, purified and redeemed community of God the Father, his Son the Lamb, and the Holy Spirit. The communion of persons in earthly families is intended to bring maturity to children and their parents as they together know the great redemptive grace of the triune God.

As we wrestle with our participation in human families, it may be helpful to be reminded of the risen Lord and his disciples in an upper room and of Christ's words of peace to them. The Spirit was given to them and sent them to the ends of the earth in the Father's mission through his Son. That mission reveals the Father's heart in his gift of creation and his forgiving gift of redemption as the revelation of himself and the life of the triune God.

The human heart relates to love, and so to mind, soul and strength (i.e. affection relates to cognition, volition and action) and hence the heart relates to giving, receiving, thanksgiving and asking even in the midst of the darkest hours, all looking to bring us into the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ – light and knowledge enough for the world now and in the age to come (2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6).

## **The family in universal action**

The Old Testament interest in widows, orphans and strangers reflects God's being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and reveals the essence of true human community: God puts the lonely in families, puts families into peoples, and peoples into the renewed race (cf. Psalm 68:5, 6; Ephesians 2:11–22). God restores creation through his covenants: God's people are redeemed and re-established in the renewed creation and live in the foretaste of this now. This is seen in the three people specifically referred to by Jesus as he hung at Golgotha: the thief, Mary, and (presumably) John.

### **Families are in the universal action of the Son**

In reading Matthew 19, it is helpful to ask personal questions concerning Jesus and who he declared himself to be when faced with the issue of divorce. Jesus used a prophetic metaphor to imply that he had come from the Father as the eternally begotten Son to wed the people of God as his bride, only to find her full of idolatry and harlotry. His refusal to divorce her expressed God's everlasting love that ensured her washing and cleansing to be the bride described in Revelation 19:6–8 and 21:1–7 (cf. Ephesians 5:25ff).

Jesus came to his own people and to his own home but was rejected (John 1:4, 10ff). Through his death he gathered into one family all those who were scattered (John 11:49, cf. 12:32).

Both themes reinforce the primacy and presence of biological parent-child relationships in individual families and in families in communities. They also inform the way humanity is to relate to those who for various reasons are on their own. It is these people that are in mind in the biblical references to widows, orphans and strangers (including refugees, outcasts, foreigners, and disenfranchised and marginalised people).

### **This action of the Son is his royal-prophetic-priestly ministry**

Hebrews 2:11ff indicates that it is through the revelation of Jesus Christ as the pioneer of a new humanity that the nations become God's glorified family. It is Jesus' revelatory word and intercessory worship which draws people in every circumstance to himself. Our calling in times of sorrow and joy is to live in Jesus' worship and word, and to declare the wonders of God's redeeming and restorative grace as God's royal, priestly and prophetic people.

Since God our heavenly Father brings his family 'to glory' through his Son's sufferings, our families are to share in Christ's life and action and so know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Parents grow in maturity as they seek to bring their children to increased maturity and encourage their own parents to grow in their own maturity.

### **The action of the Son is in the world, but not of it**

John 17:11–19 reminds us that Jesus' kingdom and authority do not have human origins. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their unity of being in communion with each other. Jesus sought to help those near him live in this communion throughout his life, including when he was crucified. Jesus' three hours of desolation are best considered in the context of this communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Only as a creature living in relationship with God as its creator, and only in personally knowing God, could Jesus bear the suffering and desolating havoc caused by our sins and the dispiriting alienation resulting from their appropriate judgement.

Jesus knew the differentiations that distinguish one person from other people and the sharing that comes as the free giving of and from these differentiations. He knew this beyond creational differences as one who loved, served and honoured, and who gave to his Father as his Son and to his God as a human person, all while being 'sin for us' (2 Corinthians 5:21 KJV; cf. 1 Peter 3:18). Jesus bore our forsakenness, desolation and abandonment on the cross until the dark and futile void of sin was filled to overflowing fullness from his light and life. All this mercy and grace was the Father's purpose in giving his Son and was continually revealed to the Son in the Son's communion with his Father in the Spirit.

Families and communities which participate in the Son's worship and mission share in the giving that comes through their personal differentiations. They complement each other and compensate for each other in the forgiveness and reconciliation that flow from grace, mercy and kindness. These families and communities do not close in on themselves but find renewal in the Son by the Holy Spirit and share in Christ's ministry to the ends of the earth.

The term 'compensation' needs careful reflection. It may mean ameliorating some situation by replacing it with a preferable alternative. It may bring reconciliation to and the re-establishment of broken relationships. There are the 'double blessings' of grace and compassion in both scenarios as restoration and renewal come to brokenness and decay. There is the possibility in the economy of holiness and love to see beyond being a fatalistic casualty of one's own failure, or from other people's shortcomings, to a future in which faith, hope and goodness flourish and families and communities prosper even when reconciliation and renewal of relationships does not eventuate (cf. Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 18).

## Humanity without family

### Focus on family

Paul described the nations as ‘having no hope’ and as being ‘without God in the world’ (Ephesians 2:11–13), while Jesus indicated that it is impossible to be neutral in the struggles of life (Luke 11:23–26). The Old Testament prophets made it clear that it is not just non-Jewish nations that weave tangled webs for themselves (Isaiah 57:3–10, 59:1–8, Jeremiah 2:2, 11–13, 19, 27–32, 3:1, 4, 19–20). Paul reinforced this theme by reminding his readers that the human dilemma is never simply about *other* people: ‘All of us … like everyone else’ (Ephesians 2:1–3).

We all too readily construct counterfeit and counterpart families whether outside of God’s family or within God’s family. These become part of an horrific Satanic scheme that aims to destroy what God creates (Revelation 9:20–21, 13:4, 17:15–18, 18:21–24). When we miss out on God’s action in bringing us ‘near by the blood of Christ’, we miss out on the achievements of God’s ‘great love with which he has loved us’ (Ephesians 2:4, 13). Hostility remains where peace and reconciliation were intended (Ephesians 2:14ff).

### Impossible for us; possible for God

The psalmist believed we, of ourselves, are faced with an impossible exercise (Psalm 130). We may cope poorly enough when exposed to human suffering in the media or in our daily lives, let alone in appreciating humanity without family from the vantage point of God’s holiness and love.

Paul wanted his readers to experience the reconciliation God made possible in Christ’s death on the cross (Ephesians 2:14ff). He reinforced Luke’s testimony of Jesus’ first and final declarations to God as ‘Father’ from the cross (Luke 23:34, 46; cf. Matthew 27:45ff where Jesus is abused for being God’s Son).

Jesus was *the* human person without family. He was forsaken in irrational hatred and anger by defiant and deviant humanity. Jesus experienced this hatred and anger at God’s refusal to endorse or sustain human evil – a divine refusal which is God’s holy ‘wrath’ against the defiance and deviance of distorted humanity. The mystery and wonder of God’s abundant grace is that *at this point, as in every situation*, the eternal Son was completely one with the will of his Father in seeking forgiveness of criminals and in opening Paradise to repentant thieves (Luke 23:32–43).

Here God’s fatherhood was at full stretch. Here was the fulfilment of the prophet’s cry: ‘you, O LORD, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name’ (Isaiah 63:16). Here was the love that never fails to hang on: ‘For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,

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and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you' (Isaiah 54:10).

### Two biblical stories

Two biblical examples may help enlarge our understanding. Cain's response to God's love contrasted the 'love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God' (1 John 3:1). John wrote that 'this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another', and added that we 'must not be like 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' (1 John 3:11, 12). We are left wondering who Cain could have looked to for an anger averting sacrifice, rather than sacrificially killing his brother. The resultant vengeance-filled spirit evident in Cain was replicated in his city-son empire east of Eden (Genesis 4:16–24; cf. Luke 18:9–14 where Jesus reminded his listeners of their tendency towards judgemental pride rather than seeking justifying mercy).

Secondly, consider the story of the generous father and the wasteful son (Luke 15:11–32). In seeing the father's generosity towards his returning younger son, and the difficulty the older son experienced about what happened with his brother, we can know something of the restorative mercy of God and the likelihood of our using privilege and position to exclude those whom God welcomes. Jesus is our 'elder brother' in God's family, and so he, as the storyteller of this parable, was contrasting the 'elder brother' with his own story.

The father lost wealth but not integrity. While he knew suffering in keeping his integrity, his giving eventually exposed his son's greedy heart and brought him to restorative judgement and reconciling justification. The father's gift was received only after it had been foolishly spent. Once truly received, the son was ready for faithful work on his return – work, he was to discover, that would be in the context of his Father's joyful embrace.

### Orphans, widows, and strangers

God's care for his people reaches well beyond Israel as his chosen people and those who see themselves as 'the body of Christ' (Ephesians 4:12). God's concerns for orphans, widows and strangers reflects something of his own being and plan as Father, Son and Spirit (see, among many other references, Deuteronomy 10:17ff, 16:11ff, 24:17ff; Isaiah 54:1–17; John 14:15–21; Revelation 21:2, 7).

## The family under attack

### Historical context

Jonathan Edwards wrote about conflict and Christianity saying that:

It is by the mixture of counterfeit religion with true, not discerned and distinguished, that the devil has had his greatest advantage against the cause and kingdom of Christ all along hitherto. It is by this means, principally, that he has prevailed against all revivings of religion that ever have been since the first founding of the Christian church. By this, he hurt the cause of Christianity in and after the apostolic age, much more than by ... persecutions. ... The apostles, in all their epistles, show themselves much more concerned at the former than the latter.<sup>33</sup>

Edward's perspective provides reminders of many biblical stories as well of prophetic, gospel and apostolic messages. The New Testament emphasises that Satan aims to pervert the pure and glorious for his own evil schemes. It reinforces this teaching in many ways, including by referring to Wisdom Woman and Eve (Proverbs 7 to 9; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:1–3; 1 Corinthians 11:7) and to brides and harlots (Revelation 12, 19:7, 21:3; cf. Proverbs 6:20–7:27; Revelation 17:1–6, 18:7; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:32).

### Seven churches, seven examples

The messages to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 provide seven examples of the struggles experienced by the people of God.

The Ephesian church had lost its first love, even though they persevered with true doctrine. Overcomers would be given 'permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God' (Revelation 2:1–7). The church in Smyrna was rich though experiencing poverty, slander and suffering from outside of the community. Those 'faithful unto death' would receive 'the crown of life', and overcomers would not be 'harmed by the second death' (Revelation 2:8–11). The church at Pergamum was commended for 'holding fast to [Jesus'] name' in the face of fierce persecution, although there were problems with idolatry in the forms of syncretism and sexual immorality. Overcomers would receive 'some of the hidden manna, and ... a white stone [on which] is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it' (Revelation 2:12–17).

In addition to their works of 'love, faith, service, and patient endurance', the church at Thyatira was trying to 'hold fast' to the truth they had received in resisting false prophets, demonic idolatry and sexual immorality. Overcomers were promised 'authority over the nations ... [and] the morning star' (Revelation 2:18–

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections, The* (Guildford and London, UK: Banner of Truth, 1961) See author's preface.

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29). Being recognised as alive but dead, as awake though asleep, was hardly a positive commendation. Yet there were those at the church in Sardis who could ‘strengthen what remains’ and be holy and pure ‘in the sight of [Jesus’] God’. These overcomers were assured they would wear ‘white robes’, have their names in ‘the book of life’, and be acknowledged ‘before [Jesus’] Father’ (Revelation 3:1–6).

The Philadelphian church had ‘little power’ compared to those opposing it but were keeping Jesus’ ‘word of patient endurance’. The promise for those who overcame was personal:

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name (Revelation 3:7–13).

The Laodicean church by contrast was insipid, ‘wretched, pitiable, blind, and naked’. It was also promised gold, white robes and eye ointment as love-gifts from Jesus, and overcomers were assured of places with Jesus on his throne (Revelation 3:14–22).

### **Satan’s weapons and our response**

Satan seeks to fracture the unity and love of God’s family by denying the truth of grace and by confusing himself with Father-God (John 8:42). The Devil accuses like a viper and deceives and chokes like a boa constrictor. Our wisest response to these attacks is not to reason with evil (cf. Jude’s comment in Jude 9 about Moses’ body). Rather, we are called to be still and to know God, and to forgive others tenderly, sharing our inheritance with them (cf. Psalm 46). Romans 8:26–39, 1 John 2:1–2, Hebrews 7:25, 10:15, and Revelation 12:10 describe something of the intercession of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and of the Holy Spirit, with the Father, all in oneness acting against the assaults of our actual and imagined enemies.

This ancient collect may help direct us in times of trouble and trial:

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.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, 28.

## **Culture and vocation**

## All one in Christ Jesus – The gospel and culture

### Healing the nations

Paul declared that if Christ had not risen from the dead, then the faith of the Corinthian believers was futile, and their condition was pitiful (1 Corinthians 15:12–19). But Christ, Paul asserted, is the first fruits of all who have died, and just as all die in Adam, so ‘all will be made alive in Christ’ (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). The culmination of history is said to be the defeat by Jesus of God’s enemies and his handing over of God’s kingdom to God the Father ‘so that God may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

Our lifestyle flows from knowing (and not knowing) God’s purposes in Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:30–34), and so from not being trapped (or being trapped) in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17). Paul wrote of the great difference between ‘the first man, Adam, [who] became a living being’ and was a ‘man of dust’, and ‘the last Adam [who] became a life-giving spirit’. Christ is ‘the second man’ and is from and of heaven. Paul claimed that just as we have borne the image of Adam, so we will bear the image of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:35–49).

The abundant wisdom of the Father’s grace is the mystery of his will which he ‘set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him’. This looks to the inheritance of those whose hope is in Christ and who ‘live for the praise of his glory’ (Ephesians 1:7–10). Having heard ‘the word of truth, the gospel of [their] salvation’, they are ‘marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit’ (Ephesians 1:11ff). God’s plan to unite all things in Christ relates to God’s ‘great power’ in raising Christ above the nations and the spiritual rulers by putting all things under Christ’s feet ‘for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:19ff).

Ephesians 2:11–22 tells of Jews and Gentiles being reconciled to God ‘in one body through the cross’. Peace is realised because both groups ‘have access in one Spirit to one Father’. They are ‘no longer strangers and aliens’ but have become ‘citizens with the saints and members of the household of God’. Ephesians 4 develops this theme in terms of the unity of God with his people, and the action of Christ in the Spirit under the Father in bringing his body, the church, to maturity, ‘to the measure of the full stature of Christ’.

On the Day of Pentecost ‘devout Jews from every nation under heaven’ heard the ‘wonderful works of God’ in their own languages. They witnessed Christ in powerful action. He had been raised from the dead, had not experienced ‘corruption’, had been exalted ‘at the right hand of God’, and had ‘received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit’. It was because of this outpouring of the Holy Spirit that those who were present saw ‘tongues, as of fire … and began to speak in other languages’ (Acts 2:1–36).

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The outpouring of the Spirit of God is the personal action of Christ, ‘the man of heaven’, the ‘life-giving spirit’ who is ‘both Lord and Messiah’ and who gathers humanity together in true community (1 Corinthians 15:45–49; Acts 2:36). At Babel, the nations had sought unity by building their city-temple (cf. Psalm 2), but their story was Adamic and deadly, not Christ-like and ‘life-giving’. Their fate was the same as Babylon’s in Revelation 17 and 18, where Babylon, that great ‘mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’ is said to be ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus’. Her sins are described as ‘heaped as high as heaven’, and she is stated as saying to herself: ‘I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief’. Yet her judgement is predicted to take only a single hour!

By contrast, Christ’s bride receives clothing indicating righteousness and purity (Revelation 19:1ff). She gives faithful testimony regarding her Bridegroom, who is Faithful and True, the Word of God, King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the ‘Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered’ who unlocks the scroll he was given (Revelation 5:6ff, 19:7). Her Saviour’s blood removes all the stains she received during her great tribulation. He shepherds her to the springs of living water which flow from the throne of God and which nourish the tree of life whose leaves are for healing the nations (cf. Revelation 7:13ff). God wipes away all tears from his Son’s bride, who is also called ‘the holy city’ and God’s dwelling place (Revelation 21:1ff). The temple in the city, where the people of God serve him day and night, has no building, but ‘is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb’ (Revelation 21:22). This *telos* of life in God correlates with Paul’s declaration that ‘As in Adam all die, even so in Christ are all made alive’ (1 Corinthians 15:22).

## Redeeming humanity and transforming culture

The magnificent diversity within every nation, and between nations, reflects the differentiations of God’s unity in communion as Father, Son and Spirit. This diversity also indicates the deficiencies that arise out of national rebellion against God and his purposes in history. Since the nations rage against God, and since God gathers his people from every nation, we can expect to find in the nations and cultures of the world what we find in ourselves: a strange mixture of the true imperishable ‘good seed’ and the false perishable ‘weeds’ (Matthew 13:24–30). While nations rightly enact laws and try to achieve unity, God gives of himself in creating humanity as the image of his unity, and then brings humanity back to himself in renewed unity by redemption. God gives us covenant life, and our response flows from this God-given gift of communion and community (cf. Romans 8:1ff).

Our cultures are our national identities. They function healthily to the extent that they correlate with God’s image and align themselves with the times and seasons God has established. God’s judgements relate to his personal forbearance and forgiveness, and not to some arbitrary, deistic, legalistic justice. These

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transforming judgements find ready expression where politics, ethnicity, gender and religion mix explosively as cultures fail to live in the creational mandates of vocation, sabbath and marriage, and their relationship to land tenure and family life.

Redeemed humanity is gathered by God to himself from the nations in and by Christ. This redeemed humanity is the salt of the earth. It bears the likeness and glory of Jesus, the ‘man from heaven’ (1 Corinthians 15:45–49). The glory of this redeemed humanity is in and through its witness to Christ, and in suffering for the one who loves them and has freed them from their sins by his blood (Revelation 1:5). It is the glory of this redemption that motivates rulers to bring national treasures into the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22–26). This glory is the creational and redemptional imaging and functioning of the family of Father-God, of the bride of Bridegroom-Christ, and of the community of the Holy Spirit.

Nothing unrefined and impure from Babylonian culture will be in the new creation. To speak of Babylonian culture being in the new creation in its self-absorbed indulgence and God-directed defiance is to imply either the persistence of evil or to deny the transformative giving of Christ to his body in the gifts and ministries it receives. The mercies and generosity of God do not produce cults all pulling in confusion in different directions under self-inflicted judgement, as at Babel, but, in the full richness of the differentiations of Pentecost, true cultural diversity fills the renewed earth as the garden-city of God. Redeemed humanity is at home together under each group’s ‘vine and fig tree’. It is not scattered as strangers, but spreads across the whole earth in full adoring thanksgiving as God’s holy people (Joel 2:22; Zechariah 3:10).

### **Living in the future**

What does this mean for us now? It means we are the body of Christ, the true human person, who is the primary and ultimate Word and Worshipper for all. Our lives have true unity and purpose within our cultures as we ‘know Christ and the power of his resurrection’, and as we are ‘not conformed to this world’ but are ‘transformed by the renewing of our minds’ (Philippians 3:10; Romans 12:1ff). Our efforts to reach upwards from our own strength are, in the end, futile. Christ brings about the ‘obedience of the nations’ by empowering and strengthening his people (Romans 1:5, 16:26). Our calling is to live in Christ, go with him, share with him, and be in what he is doing as the firstborn of creation, as the first-born from the dead (Colossians 1:15, 18).

The message of his cross is folly and weakness to this world and its power and wisdom, but it is God’s wisdom and power. God has chosen

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. [God our Father] is the source of [our] life in Christ Jesus, who became for

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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 1:28–31).

The gospel brings us into the ‘fellowship of his Son’, ‘not lacking in any spiritual gift’, but sustained in Christ ‘to the end’, guiltless and enriched in the grace of God (1 Corinthians 1:4–9). Our calling is to enhance community life and culture as we mature in Christ through the powerful personal presence of the Spirit.

True proclamation of the testimony and mystery of God flows from those who have the mind of Christ:

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:8ff).

What could ever compare with the life of this redeemed people in all its richness, colour, liberty, character, relationships and grace as the mature body and bride of Christ, the true community of the Spirit and family of the God and Father of us all (Ephesians 3:14–4:6)?

What could be more refreshing, renewing and reinvigorating than participating in communities living in ways that actively replace hierarchical domination with mutually sacrificial love, and where roles are determined by gifts and graces rather than race, gender, narrow dogma or social and economic class (cf. Galatians 3:25–29; Philippians 2:1–18; Ephesians 5:10–6:20 noting 5:21)?

## The Trinity in secular life

### **Secular**

Secular (concerned with temporal, worldly matters) is usually used as a term to contrast religious (expressing our acknowledgment of the divine), just as sacred (set apart for God) often contrasts with profane (set apart from God). Profane and secular may imply an anti-sacred or anti-religious stance rather than one of indifference, although indifference may also be an 'anti' stance. Secular may refer to an institution not under the control of a religious body.

### **The Trinity and the ages**

When asking about the nature of God's ongoing involvement in so-called secular life it is helpful to look beyond defining abstract theological responses. I have nominated three areas for personal and community reflection and practical action and interaction: creation, covenant and Christ.

### ***Creation***

From a theological perspective, there is no ontological secular, only that which is self-decreed. Creation proclaims God as the primary, joyful giver, and God's abundance is evident at every coordinate of space-time history and to every living creature. God's liberal (prodigal but not reckless) goodness gives abundant resource for every age, though his giving is never for our independence from him as faithful Creator. The Creator, who relates to humanity, calls himself Father, Son and Spirit, reveals himself in his giving and forgiving, and achieves his unshakeable goals for his creation. This revelation is the pure outpouring of unsolicited love, holiness, truth and goodness. No relationship – no life – can function apart from this creative activity. All life is captured in the divine and hence human social embrace of asking, giving, receiving and thanksgiving. Since humanity is the crowning glory in and of creation, the creation itself is of such grandeur as to enable the full revelation of this magnificence. 'All things are yours', not for our own possession, but for circulation, and hence bringing fruitfulness and giving dignity (1 Corinthians 3:21).

### ***Covenant***

Grace is God's affirmation of his sovereignty to fallen humanity. It is his declaration that even though creation might disintegrate around them, redeemed humanity will not be cut off from relating to him as Father, Son and Spirit. His covenant is his promise that any such fragmentation demonstrates the transience of everything that seeks self-existence, and that his family will ultimately be revealed in their renewed, re-created, re-integrated home. God's sovereignty and glory are known relationally; he achieves his goal in creation without ceasing to present each culture and each person with his redeeming grace. His blessings come personally, as does our adoption through his atoning sacrifice. God's covenants are

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not mechanical or works-oriented but call on our faith in the welfare of God. All God's covenants are inextricably linked with God's purposes in creation and his intent that we share in their realisation.

### *Christ*

Christ is God's humanity. Our humanity is found in him. He gathers humanity together in one worship by one Spirit to one Father. We are drawn away from worshipping the creation and building our secularist kingdoms to serve our Father-Creator as he accomplishes his *telos*. This life is the culture and society of eternity, appropriate for this age and the age to come. We are partakers of a divine nature who is not an armchair god, but who created and re-creates by Christ not grasping at his deity but humbly and sacrificially pouring himself as a human person into the morass of human deprivation, depravity and deviation. Christ's worship (worth-ship) dignifies humanity, denying evil in its attempt to permanently shame God's created offspring. It is Christ's adoration of his Father in the face of the deepest, despicable defiance humanity could personally and corporately deliver that constitutes his suffering and death. He embodied and expressed the divine determination that not only would creation be purified, but that this purification would be the action of freely given love. This love is given to us from among us: Jesus Christ pitched his tent in his creation; in our camp.

### **Responses**

Common Christian responses to secularism include pietism (withdrawal from society to religious enclaves) and pragmatism (interacting with society as each occasion seems to demand). Living as a pietist does not remove us from our culture, it merely redefines our relationships to it. Pragmatists do well to remember the risks to faithfulness that can come from pragmatic engagement.

It is not difficult to find helpful theology that tackles the city of humanity and the city of God (Revelation 17 to 22), Adam and Christ (Romans 5; 2 Corinthians 5), and the Spirit and the flesh (Romans 8; Galatians 6). We have our life as those 'on whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10:12). This may refer to the current age which is passing away and the eternal age which is already operating. There is a conflict between two kingdoms, a battle only understood by revelation. Yet we need to be careful to distinguish in what sense we speak of the secular, noting the different New Testament uses of the words translated as flesh, world, age and generation.

Secularism, like all '-isms', reduces reality to its own parameters. Life is seen as only what it seems to be 'under the sun'. Forms of secularism, however brilliantly articulated, are seen by the biblical writers as foolish (cf. Psalm 14; Ecclesiastes; 1 Corinthians 1; John 5). The essence of this folly is in being locked into one's own environment and history, hence closing oneself off from God and his eternity. In rejecting this approach, we are never to disregard anyone as that would isolate us

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from part of God's creation. Biblical wisdom fears God and his word. It humbly pursues love, righteousness and justice, and so learns true wisdom (Proverbs 1 to 9; Isaiah 66:4; Micah 6:8).

Both the secular and the religious may well be parts of one piece. True differentiation is seen in the orientation of faith, not in the practice or otherwise of religious ritual. For example, those with weak consciences (as discussed in Romans and 1 Corinthians) were weak in faith because they relied on social practices to determine their ethics, rather than on Christ. By contrast, Christ 'was crucified in weakness', meaning he did not ultimately rely for his identity on his generation's economic, psychological, political, educational, social or technological wisdom, but on the promises and power of God (2 Corinthians 13:4; Romans 1:4; Matthew 4).

The religious leaders of Jesus' day did not recognise that Jesus had come from his Father, that he lived and died in unity with his Father by the Spirit as a human person, and was raised and ascended, returning to his Father (John 6:61–63, 8:14). He came to his own; he was in the world, but was unrecognised (e.g. John 6:26, 27). His prayer was not for our removal from the world (including from the secular), but for protection from the evil one (the prince of this world). Because the disciples had been given the Father's word of eternal life, they were also no longer *of* this world. It was and is the Father's word that sent them, and sends us, *into* the world *in* which we live (John 1, 17, 20:21). God loves the world, but not as Demas did (John 3:16; 2 Timothy 4:10). When our affections are correctly oriented, our participation in our physical environments and in our cultures and communities will be most fruitful (1 John 2:15–17). There is no other legitimate sharing in God's glory.

## The blessing of human vocation

### The LORD builds the house

Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labour in vain.  
Unless the Lord guards the city,  
the guard keeps watch in vain.  
It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives sleep to his beloved (Psalm 127:1, 2).

Solomon, to whom this Psalm is attributed, had in mind the kingdom promised to his father in 2 Samuel 7:11ff. David believed his kingdom was significant for other nations, and that both he and his nation were unworthy of this divine calling, ‘for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you’ who had redeemed and established them as his people (2 Samuel 7:18–29). The house, then, in this Psalm refers to the temple and the king’s palace, as well as to each family home (cf. 1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zechariah 3:10).

The Davidic covenant had the previous Noahic, Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in mind, as well as God’s initial act of creation, including humanity. Each covenant referred to God’s provision of family life, with homes being places where God’s mercy and grace shaped vocational life and worship.

### East of Eden

Cain knew of God’s purposes from his parents but remained committed to his own defiant and devious lifestyle. His descendants were vengeful and violent, bringing futility and fear (Genesis 4:17–24, 6:1–7, 11:1–9). Its results have been described in various ways, including by the writer of Ecclesiastes who saw life as futile and meaningless. He disliked life and dismissed his achievements

seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish (Ecclesiastes 2:18–19)?

In Revelation 18, verses 7 and 8, a voice from heaven details God’s judgements on Babylon, the city that completes the sequence begun with the city Cain built ‘east of Eden’ and named after his son.

Shelley’s Ozymandias reflects something of this description:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert ...  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’

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Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.<sup>35</sup>

### O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

The people of God are to conquer while living *in* Babylon. Their conquest involves living the covenant life in which Abel, Seth, and all God's people lived (Jeremiah 29:1–7). Ezekiel and Daniel are a great encouragement to us of what this means, as was Joseph in his story. Their victory was not their own doing, it was God's work in them (cf. Isaiah 26:12). God decrees and dispenses peace and achieves what his people failed to do when they had given way to idolatry:

Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O LORD; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world.

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 26:17–19).

John described Jesus' humanity in the context of Israel's history. Jesus was not accepted or received by his people as who he was, but, empowered by belief, people nonetheless became God's family, 'born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:11–13).

Jesus' ministry is embraced by Gospel accounts of him cleansing the temple as the true tabernacle-temple of God among us (John 1:14–18, 2:13–22; Matthew 21:12–17). God's purposes in creation and covenant are fulfilled in him, and in him alone. He came as his 'Father's house' so that as the 'house of prayer for all nations' he, in being 'lifted up', would gather all humanity to himself in and by his death on the cross (John 11:49–52, 12:27ff; Isaiah 56:7).

Israel, under Moses, was taken out of Egypt to be God's family and to live in the promised land. The exiles returned home according to God's promises, but it is only through Jesus that the family fully comes home (John 14:1ff). Jesus' ministry, including his promise to the dying thief in Luke 23:43, affirms this, as do his promises to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

The writer of Hebrews reasoned along similar lines. Jesus, 'the apostle and high priest of our confession', is more worthy than Moses because 'the builder of all things is God'. As 'holy partners in a heavenly calling', we can have 'the confidence and the pride that belong to hope' because of Christ's faithfulness 'over [us as] God's house as a son' (Hebrews 3:1–6).

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<sup>35</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Ozymandias,' <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ozymandias>.

### **God is at work in you**

Paul wrote to the Philippians that he wanted them to live together in love and unity and to place a primacy on the welfare of other people. After sharing a hymn about Jesus' life, death and ascension, Paul urged them 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 2:1–13).

Paul believed God was working in them to fulfil their calling, even as God worked in Christ to fulfil Christ's calling. It is because of Christ's work as a human person that we can 'work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling'. As Christ worked so we are to work, for he, with the Father and in the Spirit, is at work in us. This is the encouragement that is in Christ, the consolation from God's love, the sharing in the Spirit, and the compassion and sympathy which Paul described as being the 'mind that was in Christ Jesus'.

Earlier in this letter to the Philippian church, Paul wrote of his confidence 'that the one who began a good work among you will bring it [carry it on] to completion by the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:6; cf. NIV).

Ephesians 2:8–10 conveys a similar message, with Isaiah 26:12 possibly in mind: 'O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for indeed, all that we have done, you have done for us'.

### **At work on the sabbath**

John 5:17–21 speaks of God's work on the sabbath (cf. 1 John 3:8b). The sabbath reminded the Israelites not only of creation but of their Exodus from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:11; Deuteronomy 5:15; cf. Exodus 5:1ff).

Since all history from the commencement of the seventh day of creation is lived in *God's* sabbath rest, true human vocation is the overflow of this communion with God in *God's* vocation in *God's* creation, his dwelling place or home among us, his kingdom (Genesis 2:1–3). All of God's purposes are fulfilled in eternity, in the Paradise of God, in his new creation (Revelation 14:13, 21:1ff). Outside of this context is endless toil and turmoil, futile 'vocation' which is 'vacant-ation', bringing death to the life, love, liberty and joy of being co-workers with God (cf. Isaiah 65:17–66:2; cf. Acts 17:22–31).

God's work in creation and in covenant is in the human family at home. God is at work in us, according to his purposes in us and in all history: in our families and marriages, in our vocations and in the sabbath.

### **Christ is the bridegroom, the true worker**

The true sabbath is Christ's. Jesus used a bridegroom metaphor about feasting to speak of his presence with them (Matthew 9:14, 15; cf. John 3:27–30; Matthew

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19:3ff). Jesus' prayer in John 17 indicated that his being with them was so that they would be given eternal life:

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do (John 17:1ff).

Early in his ministry, Jesus had prayed to God as 'Father, Lord of heaven and earth' who, having hidden the reality of the kingdom of heaven, had handed everything to him. Jesus said that 'no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him'. Jesus invited anyone carrying burdens to come to him for rest, 'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:26–30).

Our renewed relationships are our life in God's covenant in his creation. These relationships are according to God's personal calling of us. They are evident in our relationships with our parents, with our spouse if we are married, with our children where they are given to us, and in the community and church. These relationships relate to human community including where we focus on

- exploring creation in our vocations and recreations.
- our community life together as citizens in creation.
- the inter-relationships between these realms of learning and living.

It is by and in our participation in the word and worship that God as Triune Community shares with humanity in bringing all history to its true goal that this full vocation is fully realised.

### **Blessings and sanctification**

To participate in this Triune action is to live in these blessings – in the Blessed One! It is the Father's plan that we are blessed 'in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love'. Our sanctified destiny is 'adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved'. This is the great work of God at Calvary where 'he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:3ff).

'In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance' for which we 'were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ... the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory'. These blessings are the culmination – the realisation, the revelation – of the blessings given at creation and promised to Noah, Abraham, Moses and David; as well as in the new covenant (cf. Genesis 1:22, 28, 2:3, 5:2). These blessings find expression in our immediate

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circumstances, however dislocated our lives may seem to be. This is Christ's word in the Spirit from the Father to us, to the 'heavy laden', to those Jesus referred to in the Beatitudes, and for whom he died and rose and ascended to the Father to pour out the Spirit so as to free us from the futility of 'dead works to serve the living God' (Matthew 5:3–16, 11:26–30; Hebrews 9:14, 10:5–25, 35–39).

This service is not artificial. Those in Christ are new creations. They are Christ's ambassadors as 'God is making his appeal through us' (2 Corinthians 5:14–21). This must mean that God cites us as evidence of the kind of work in which he excels. He raises those dead in sin, he grips fallen humanity with his love, and we become evidence and testimony to all humanity of what God does! It is in this vein that we live in this vain world! It is as renewed humanity in Christ that God speaks through us to our fallen race!

Our vocation finds expression in creation in covenant, and in covenant in creation. This proclamation is suitable for the ends of the ages, and beyond. It is the testimony of Jesus, the Spirit of prophecy, concerning God's holy people in the holy city as Father-God's family at home, living in the marriage of the bride and the Lamb, in the temple who is God with us (Revelation 19 to 22).

### **Work, vocation and calling**

The words vocation and calling are closely related. It is God who calls; the church is the gathering of those whom he has called; our calling is our vocation. Paul described himself as one who was 'called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God'. The church is 'those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints', regardless of their social, ethnic or religious background (1 Corinthians 1:1, 2, 26; cf. Romans 1:1–7, 11:29).

To be called by God the Father who 'is faithful' 'into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' is not individualistic. It is a participation not only in the human community of the church and surrounding society, but in the divine life Jesus shares from within the triune God. This gift is the fruit of Jesus' death on the cross (1 Corinthians 1:9, 22–24, 7:20, 24; cf. 1 John 3:1ff). Paul identified 'the hope to which he has called you' with 'the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints'; the 'one hope of [your] calling' within 'one body and [by] one Spirit'. Hence his exhortation was that they 'walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called' (Ephesians 4:1 KJV, cf. 1:18).

This active participation in God's purposes is a matter of exhortation (e.g. 2 Peter 1:10, 11; Philippians 3:12–15). It is an exhortation to share in 'the holy calling' that God has given his people (2 Timothy 1:9, 10; cf. Romans 8:28–30). We are 'holy partners in a heavenly calling', a calling that is realised in Christ who 'was faithful [in all God's house] to the one who appointed him'. Jesus has pioneered our salvation and sanctification by being faithful in immense suffering. We are the

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family of God that God has given to him and which he acknowledges and affirms (Hebrews 2:10–3:2).

Our human vocation – our calling – is our response to God as *Vocator*, as Caller. The psalmist contrasts this vocation with the lot of the wicked (Psalms 37, 73). The writer of Proverbs noted that ‘the human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps’, and that ‘all our steps are ordered by the LORD; how then can we understand our own ways’ (Proverbs 16:9, 20:24).

In this vocation, one is not to be concerned about security or greatness: ‘Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all’ (Ecclesiastes 9:11). It is the Father’s pleasure to provide for his children (Matthew 6:25–34; Luke 11:13, 12:13–40). He, with his Son and the Spirit, are among us ‘as one who serves’ (Luke 22:24–27). This is the true greatness of true vocation – as is described by the story of the poor wise man of Ecclesiastes 9:13–18.

### Conclusion

East of Eden lie the ruins of self-designed and self-oriented enterprise. This is the converse of the LORD building a home for his family. God builds and rebuilds his dwelling place by resurrecting his people into covenant relationship with himself. This is the story of Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Israelites, David and his kingdom, and the faithful women and men who are named and unnamed in Scripture. It is in Jesus that all of God’s redeemed prodigal family come home in and to God’s prodigious blessings. It is here and there that we discover our authentic identity and vocation and more fully know ourselves as worshippers in God’s sabbath and as participants in his works of creation and covenant grace.

Blessings now flow where curses had been. The cup of wrath has been drunk at the cross. The cup of blessing is our ‘sharing in the blood of Christ’ for the Passover Lamb has been sacrificed and the festival has begun (1 Corinthians 5:7, 10:16). God’s sanctified people share in Christ’s calling. This calling brings nothing less than the renewal of all things in heaven and on earth.

Our vocation is in the calling of God personally and corporately to his people. It is an exploration in the Spirit of our inheritance in Christ as God the Father directs. Human vocation cannot be seen individualistically. Its milieu is the society in which we live. We know who we are, personally and as a community, as we know the Father as the one who calls (as *Vocator*), the Son as the one who is called and who calls, and the Spirit who brings us into this Triune calling by calling us with the Father and the Son. This revelation declares the true vocation for humanity in community to and in this world.

## Grace, work and prayer

### Work is a gift

Jesus was criticised for working! His reply was to declare that ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too am working’ (John 5:17). In responding to the anger that this comment drew, Jesus added that ‘the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son does also. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does’ (John 5:19, 20).

Here is a description of the intimacy of God at work. This revelation is given not in theological abstraction but in the humanity of Jesus. He not only unveils the nature of his own employment but reveals the essence of all true work. Work is God’s gift to humanity. Adam and Eve were created for work. Together they were given a vast job specification. Humanity forfeited its dignity when in its rebellion it rejected the *Giver* of work and no longer saw work as God’s *good gift*. Everything is accomplished in Christ. Human dignity is realised in Jesus, who as a human person among other people, worked according to and in harmony with his Father and the Holy Spirit.

Since work is a gift that all are structured to receive, to work from or for ourselves is destructive, alienating and deadly. Only as members of God’s family can we truly work. To be God’s family is to have the ‘Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead’ living in us (Romans 8:11). We receive the Spirit of Jesus’ sonship, the same Spirit whom God gave his Messiah ‘without limit’ (John 3:34). We receive the Spirit as the fruit of Christ’s work, namely, the offering of himself ‘as a ransom for many’ (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). So effective is this work that Christ declares that those whom he does not leave as orphans ‘will do even greater things than these [miracles], because I go to the Father’ (John 14:12–18).

### Prayer and work

When prayer appears to be irrelevant there is a possibility that true work is not underway, just as there is a likelihood that unwelcome conflict is occurring. To assume that we only work because ‘God has no hands but our hands’ is to remove from prayer (and life) the peaceful joy of God’s adequacy as Creator, Redeemer and Father. God’s hands are crucified hands; hands that carry us and work for our welfare: We have no hands but God’s hands – hands on whom we can depend as we work with our hands.

To assume that prayer is of little issue because God has his universe running to a predetermined mechanical agenda is to miss the joy of knowing that God is at work in us ‘to will and to act according to his own good purpose’ (Philippians 2:13). To cease from prayer because ‘God is in the heavens and he does as he

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pleases' is equivalent to ceasing from work because God is working (Psalms 115:3; 135:6).

Prayer is that relationship with God whereby God motivates, leads and works in and through us to complete that which he is about in human history. His work in us is to fit us for the new creation that will one day be revealed. We have the joy of being co-workers with him, of sharing in his outpoured love, and of being cleansed from our idolatrous selfish works to do his will.

No wonder Paul described living from or for ourselves and not doing the good that we want to do while doing under sin's tyranny the evil we do not want to do as wretched (Romans 7:14–25). God is at work, and we are to work in obedient harmony with him, drawing on his love and holiness.

### Grace at work

What is God's work? It is the revelation of his grace 'expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus'. We are his workmanship; we are 'no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household' (Ephesians 2:7, 19). Human accomplishment finds its authenticity and significance in the context of 'the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (Philippians 3:8). 'To know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings' is to know the majesty of him 'who bore our sins in his body on the tree'. It is to know who was made sin and curse for us, who 'cleanses our conscience from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God' and who now, as Lord of history, pours out the Holy Spirit as herald of the kingdom that sees 'every tongue confess that Christ Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 3:10; 1 Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:14; Philippians 2:10, 11).

How incredible it is to be free from ever having to accomplish anything from our own resources. Christ relied on his Father in everything he did. Christ's work was continually in the context of prayer and was not of or from his own strength. His saving work relates us to himself and his Father in and through the Spirit, freeing us to live in grace: free from assuming we can improve our circumstances or ourselves on our own. The harvest which grace accomplishes is eternally significant.

There are not better or worse Christians or better or worse people, simply each person living in or against grace in the everyday situations that each one faces. Paul's testimony was: 'By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace has not been without effect in me' (1 Corinthians 15:10). What motivations and constraints are in this witness?! Paul also wrote that 'We proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me' (Colossians 1:28, 29).

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## **Conversations along the way**

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

### **In this series**

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I am especially thankful for the insights into life, love and hope that Bev, my wife, and our family have shared with me. Their patience, kindness and generosity have led me to a deeper awareness of God and his mercy and grace.

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<sup>36</sup> This book contains edited background notes of sessions from 1984 and 2005 inclusive. Another nine sessions included seminars with topical contexts such as Don Priest, *Pastor, the Teacher, and the School, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications Inc., 1987). *God Is Not up for Re-Election* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications Inc., 1984) explores aspects of themes relating to the kingdom of God.

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In what ways did New Testament authors understand God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? In what ways did they explore and express their living experiences of community in the context of this divine disclosure and the difficulties and dilemmas they faced?

*In Triune Community* considers questions like these through a focus on God's being, revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It highlights the shared life of the people of God, aware of God's presence with us and in us, and his purposes for us and through us.

*In Triune Community* anticipates further exploration of these and similar questions in their historical, social, educational and theological settings. It encourages readers to connect with situations where worship is deepened, relationships are strengthened and applications to everyday life are enriched.

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