



Living in Love and Freedom

Conversations along the way

Don Priest

Living in Love and Freedom

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Introduction

Living in Love and Freedom aims to help readers consider a number of biblical and theological themes, and to assist them explore several New Testament books. It comprises interrelated but free-standing parts, each of which encourages thoughtful contemplation and meaningful conversations.

Living Together in Love and *One in Love and Freedom* use an Introduction, Discovery and Reflection format designed for regular small groups. *Living Together in Love* looks at Luke-Acts based on Acts 1:1–11 (*Times or seasons*), the life and death of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (*With us forever*), the letter of Paul to the Philippians (*Encouragement, comfort and participation*), an approach to understanding life's complexities (*Compassion and care*), and the seven sayings of Jesus from the cross (*The gospel of the cross*). *One in Love and Freedom* focuses on the way the book of Revelation explains God's victorious, liberating love acting in grace and mercy amid life's difficulties to bring humanity wisdom, peace, hope and joy now and forever.

Living Treasures are background notes written during sermon preparation for Sunday services. Most of the main biblical passages are from Mark's and other Gospels, and Paul's letters.

Reflections is a collection of meditations arising from themes talked over in informal conversations. They provide further perspectives on other parts of *Living in Love and Freedom*.

Living in Love and Freedom is a lay-person's working journal, written and shared in the hope that it will encourage growth in love and understanding as we care for one other in this beautiful but troubled world. I hope that, as this book is read, worship is deepened, relationships are encouraged and application to everyday life is enriched.

Don Priest

August 2017

Living Together in Love

Initial thoughts

These studies were prepared in the hope that reflecting on various biblical passages and themes would prove enriching. The ideas provided are starting points rather than final propositions. They are shared in the belief that we know more of who God is, and the ways in which he works, as we consider the Scriptures together.

Learning this way best occurs in the context of worship and thankfulness, with a focus on the practical, pastoral priorities always present to us in the household of God and in the communities in which we live. We can grow in awe and wonder of the God in whom we live and move and have our being as we discover more of God's plan and purposes for his world (cf. Acts 17:22–31).

Several core beliefs are relevant. God is one and is triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has revealed himself in Christ, who is Immanuel, God with us. Jesus is eternal Word become flesh, anointed with the Holy Spirit without measure. The sufferings, death and resurrection of Jesus are central to God's purposes and revelation. God is reconciling all things to himself in Christ, and releasing creation from 'its bondage to decay' to obtain 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God'. God's family know 'Abba, Father' by the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us (Romans 8; Galatians 4). Human relationships can be radically altered by the grace and mercy of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17–5:21; Galatians 3:26ff, 5:22ff).

Times or seasons

Perspectives on Luke and Acts from Acts 1:1–11

Acts 1:1–11 is a bridging passage between Luke's Gospel and his account of the early Christian communities that emerged after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In these verses, Luke provides a rich framework for understanding his two books. His initial narrative refers to Jesus, to God as Father and to the Holy Spirit. This one God is revealed in three persons, with Luke not immediately analysing or reflecting on his description. For Luke, God is to be encountered and experienced in ways consistent with the events he describes. The end of his second book reinforces Luke's perspectives on the nature of the kingdom of God, the present work of Jesus as Lord, the sovereignty of the Father, and the power of the Holy Spirit in effecting the divine will.

The kingdom of God

Introduction

What does Luke see as important in writing his two volumes? The first verses of the book of Acts provide some helpful answers. Luke focuses on the resurrected Jesus and God's kingdom, on the presence of the Holy Spirit with the early church, and on the Father's authority in and through these events.

Our journey in reading Scripture starts with our stories and our perspectives – who we are – and the ways in which we read the Bible. We interact with a different narrative from our own history and worldview, hopefully wanting to grow in understanding the God revealed in Jesus. As we read the Bible, we become aware of the themes and truths that shaped the lives of the original writers and those about whom they wrote. For Luke, these matters are personal; they relate to his understanding of the presence and action of God with his people.

Discovery

The following verses mention the 'kingdom of God'. For each text, discuss what is happening in the related passage, and what ideas and experiences are linked with the 'kingdom of God' in it. What does Luke understand by the term 'kingdom of God'?

After his sufferings, he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6).

But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women (Acts 8:12).

There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22).

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8).

'And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again' (Acts 20:25).

After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets (Acts 28:23).

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... proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:31).

Reflection

Luke's understanding of the kingdom of God relates to his description of the Lord Jesus Christ and his present ministry and reign (cf. Acts 4).

Lord refers to authority and power, and so to human *relationships*. Jesus' lordship involves God being present as a human person among us, sharing our journey, and fulfilling God's purposes.

Jesus speaks of salvation, of good news about God's mercy, peace and grace expressed through forgiveness and reconciliation. It involves *release* and *recovery* (cf. Luke 4:18, 19 and 9:31).

Christ or *Messiah* relates to *fulfilment* and *restoration* – from traumas and sorrows as well as in joys and triumphs, with 'times of refreshment' (Acts 3:20) known in, through and by the Holy Spirit.

Lord, *Jesus* and *Christ* are not unrelated titles: The same person is *Lord* and *Jesus* and *Christ*. The *Lord Jesus* is *Messiah*, the *Lord Messiah* is *Jesus*, and *Messiah Jesus* is *Lord*.

Next time

What does Luke's Gospel teach us about God's kingdom?

In what ways did different first century Jewish groups like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes look for the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, and how did they go about achieving their goal? What was different about Jesus and those who received his teaching?

Restoring the kingdom to Israel

Introduction

The disciples' question about restoring the kingdom to Israel is asked in the context of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. The disciples were no doubt hoping life in Israel would improve under the reign of God through Messiah Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, but were wondering when this would occur. Prior to his death, Jesus made it clear that he was not expecting any restoration in the immediate future.

The historical context of Luke's story helps inform us about Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom of God and its implications for our own story, and for our own hopes for our families and friends.

The Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes all wanted the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, but went about it in different ways. Piety, politics, force and separation may provide short term results, but Jesus pointed to a longer term and more sustainable solution, one achieved in God's time and consistent with his own being. Saul, a zealous Pharisee (cf. Philippians 3:4–6), left Jerusalem for Damascus with a clear agenda, and met Ananias 'a devout man according to the law and well-spoken of by all the Jews' on quite different terms than Saul had originally planned (Acts 22:12, cf. 9:10).

Discovery

In what ways did Ananias think about and act towards Saul, and what changes in Saul's attitude and behaviour towards Ananias occurred (Acts 9:1-31 and Acts 22:12)? In what ways do their actions and attitudes reflect Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God?

In what ways do the records of Paul's conversion help us understand Jesus' response to the disciples' question about the restoration of the Jewish kingdom?

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7, 8).

Reflection

In Acts 1:8, Jesus' use of 'but' suggests that life in the kingdom of God alters our vision and priorities. Life with Jesus as Lord and Messiah and with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit means our approach to other people changes. If the kingdom of God and the person and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ are linked as Luke connects them, then Acts 1:1–8 suggests that Jesus was explaining a different way, a fifth way – the Way (Acts 9:2, 18:25, 19:9, 23, 22:4, 24:14, 22) –

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of living. His Way impacts personally and politically, and turns the world's ways upside down (Acts 17:6).

Next time

What does Luke's Gospel teach us about how Jesus interacted with the Pharisees and Sadducees? In what ways does this compare with his involvement with people whom they usually rejected?

The book of Acts can be understood as a journey from Jerusalem to Rome; one where the proclamation of the gospel confronts the Roman Empire and various local religious groups. What are the main ways this confrontation happens in the book of Acts, and what do these events teach us about the kingdom of God?

Power to be Jesus' witnesses

Introduction

God fixes the times and seasons 'by his own authority' (Acts 1:7). The disciples were promised power to be witnesses of all that Jesus was continuing to do and teach under his Father's authority. The disciples were to be baptised in and with the Holy Spirit, and would testify to Jesus as resurrected Lord, Saviour and Messiah. Their witness would first be in Jerusalem, and then move out through Judea and Samaria, reaching beyond Rome to the ends of the earth.

Discovery

The following verses mention power. For each text, discuss what is happening in the related passage, and what ideas and experiences are linked with power. What does Luke understand by power?

'And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because ... "in our own languages we hear [the apostles] speaking about God's deeds of power". ... But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "... You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power"' (Acts 2:6-24).

With 'great power' – but not by their 'own power' – the apostles 'gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 3:12, 4:7, 33).

'Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people' (Acts 6:8).

Simon of Samaria wanted 'this power', but needed to learn that it could not be bought (Acts 8:10, 19).

Peter preached to Cornelius and his family and friends about 'how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38).

Paul explained his calling to King Agrippa as being 'to open [the Gentiles'] eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Jesus]' (Acts 26:18).

Reflection

Power in the book of Acts is exercised under the Father's authority by his Son, through the Holy Spirit. God's power cannot be manipulated, manufactured, controlled or enforced by human effort. God gives 'grace and power' to his people to do good and to heal the oppressed (cf. Luke 4:14-22). Spiritual opposition to the reign of God confronted Paul throughout his ministry. It came from those in religious and political authority, from people with vested interests, and from others caught up in the tyranny of oppression and evil. The book of Acts describes how forgiveness and sanctification came to those who turned from 'darkness to light'. It details ways in which people, in God's power, shared in achieving God's purposes according to his plan and promises (Acts 26:18). Just as it occurred at Pentecost, the impact of the reign of God reached different ethnic communities. Men and women were changed and related differently to each other, and people from various life situations were set free.

Next time

What does Luke's Gospel teach us about power?

Acts 1:4 refers to the 'promise of the Father', while Acts 1:8 speaks of receiving 'power when the Holy Spirit has come upon [the disciples and those who believe their message]' (see also Acts 2:32-39). In what ways does Luke 24:36-53 enrich our understanding of this promise, especially regarding the kingdom of God, the authority of the Father, the ongoing work of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit?

The promise of the Father

Introduction

Jesus told his disciples that, although they would not know the times or seasons regarding the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, a new time and season of the Spirit was about to commence. The first two chapters of Acts tell us the way this new era began, with the rest of the book devoted to an account of part of the growth of the early church from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond.

There would be no easy answers for the followers of Jesus. The ‘promise of the Father’ would help them in life’s crises rather than immediately remove these struggles from them. This assistance would come with and by the Holy Spirit who would so empower them for these situations that they would be witnesses to the life and death of Jesus ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8).

Discovery

Acts 1:1–8

What does Luke tell us about the way Jesus instructed his disciples?

What times (*chronos*) and seasons (*kairos*) did the disciples (and so do we) not know about?

What times and seasons are we in until Jesus returns ‘in the same way as [they] saw him go into heaven’?

What does Jesus identify as ‘the promise of the Father’?

Acts 2:1–36

What did God do through Jesus during his ministry?

What did Jesus *receive* when he was ‘exalted at the right hand of God’?

What did Jesus *do* with what he *received*?

What does it mean for Jesus to be ‘both Lord and Messiah’?

In what ways does ‘the promise of the Father’ apply to Jesus and to us?

Identify ways in which Luke’s first book – his Gospel – prepares his readers for these insights. For example:

What do Luke 3:22, 4:1, 14, 10:21 and 11:13 teach us about Luke’s understanding of the Holy Spirit?

In what ways does this help us understand Luke’s references to Messiah (Christ) in Luke 2:11, 26, 3:15, 4:41, 9:20, 20:41, 22:67 and 23:2, 35, 39?

In what ways do Luke’s references to Messiah in Luke 24:25, 26 and 24:46–49 prepare his readers for the first two chapters of his second book (Acts)?

Reflection

Jesus lived in the fullness of the Spirit, and then, as exalted Lord and Messiah, sent the Holy Spirit after his death, resurrection and ascension. The Father's promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus, his Son, was for his earthly life and for his exaltation as ascended Lord.

The Holy Spirit leads and helps us in all the triumphs, tragedies and trials of life. We would never know what Jesus continues to do and teach without his presence. We would not know life under the reign of God as the people of God. We would not be empowered to witness to Jesus' continuing action and instruction under his Father's authority. In receiving the Father's promise, we become Messiah-ites – Christians – in much more than name only. We receive from Jesus the same Holy Spirit he received. As man among us, he received the Spirit as the Son of God; we receive the Spirit as the family of God to live in the reign of God by the power of God.

Our lives will not become some idyllic and untroubled serenity by living in the reign of God. We embrace the issues of life knowing that we are not abandoned, and not alone. We are among a community of people for whom the Father's promise is not mere concept but present reality as the Holy Spirit teaches us and leads us in the reign of Jesus.

Acts 1:1–11 sets the context for Luke's account of the impact of the reign of God in the growth of the church from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke's account of the 'two men in white robes' asking why the disciples were 'looking up toward heaven' shapes the book of Acts by focusing on the present reality and future expectation of the reign of God and promise of the Spirit.

With us forever

Perspectives on the life and death of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel

Looking at early and late sections of Matthew's Gospel highlights several significant aspects of his writing. Matthew gives clear frameworks for considering the death of Jesus, and seems to be keen to provide understanding and insight for those who find themselves experiencing the blessings and conflicts that he sees Jesus encountering. The Sermon on the Mount identifies the heart and mind of Jesus' approach to life and ministry, as well as for those wanting to share in his Father's heavenly reign. There is much comfort and many promises in Jesus' teaching and ministry, even though the destructive intentions of his opponents leave him abandoned – even, as he says, by God – on a cross in the Place of the Skull.

Jesus' birth, baptism and temptation

Introduction

Matthew 1 to 4 sets the context for the whole of his Gospel. In contrast to Mark, Matthew commences his Gospel with a genealogy and a birth narrative. He sets his account as a sequel to the Hebrew Bible, and wants his readers to understand it as continuing a story already partially told. He connects his Gospel with significant Old Testament people and events while relating the life and death of Jesus as God being with us.

Discovery

Identify the main events and the significant people in these four chapters.

Look for links in these early chapters to Old Testament writings and identify Matthew's core themes.

Recognise references to, and hints about, Abraham, Moses, David and Elijah in the texts quoted and the events that are described in these chapters.

Reflection

Some connections to the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible include Abraham, who like the wise men, came from the East. The Exodus theme can be seen in the flight to, and return from, Egypt. John's water baptism, his preaching about baptism with fire and the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' baptism fulfilling righteousness, all link to the Exodus narrative.

Jesus' wilderness experience and his responses to the temptations can be seen in terms of his response to the Law and serve as reminders of Israel's time in the wilderness during the Exodus. Discussion about the restoration of the kingdom connects with David, while the linking of Elijah with John the Baptist clearly identifies Jesus. Jesus would bring forgiveness and 'save his people from their sins'; through him the kingdom of heaven would be established on earth, and his followers would be 'baptised with the Spirit and fire' (Matthew 1:21, 3:7–17).

The references to Isaiah 7 (Matthew 1:23), Isaiah 9 (Matthew 4:12ff), Isaiah 40 (Matthew 3:3ff) and Isaiah 60 (Matthew 4:15ff) relate to Jesus' baptism and the confirmation by the Holy Spirit and the Father regarding his identity. Matthew sees Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection as set very deeply in the context of the Hebrew Bible. These references, with other ones, indicate something of the significance Matthew places on the continuity of Jesus' life and ministry with the actions of God described in the Hebrew Scriptures.

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Next time

What similarities and differences do you notice between the start of Jesus' ministry and the way it develops in Matthew 8 and 9? Look for ways in which opposition to Jesus' ministry emerges.

Miracles

Introduction

Matthew 8 and 9 describe a series of miraculous healings immediately after his account of the Sermon on the Mount. Those healed among ‘all who were sick’ included lepers, a military servant, and demon-possessed people (Matthew 8:16). The question asked after Jesus stilled the storm was most relevant: ‘What sort of man is this?’

Discovery

Review the first four chapters of Matthew to see ways in which Jesus was described at the commencement of this Gospel. Think of the qualities that are applied to God and to Jesus, the affirmation given Jesus by the Father, the devil’s temptations, and the anointing and other ministries to Jesus of the Holy Spirit.

What miracles are described in Matthew 8 and 9? Note the ways in which these miracles were received by those healed, those connected with them, the Pharisees and other observers. What commentary did Jesus make on the miracles? What extra events did Matthew record, and what insights does he add?

Consider the way in which Matthew 9:35–38 builds on Matthew 4:23–25, and book-ends chapter 8 (leaving aside chapters 5 to 7).

Reflection

The early ministry of Jesus indicated that the kingdom of heaven was to benefit everyone who would enter it, regardless of their personal, ethnic, religious and cultural history. The heavenly kingdom was relevant for the whole of humanity and all creation, not just one localised people.

Jesus’ ministry had begun with the affirmation of his heavenly Father and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but he then encountered devilish temptations and political and religious opposition. Those who were open to seeing what was happening were rightly amazed and asked about who this person might be, and what his kingdom would mean (Matthew 8:27).

Next time

In what ways does Jesus’ relationship with the Jewish leadership develop in Matthew 9 and 12? Look for the ways in which hostility against Jesus grows, and ways in which Jesus responds.

Identify ways in which Jesus’ ministry matures while this opposition increases.

Jesus and the Pharisees

Introduction

From the beginning of Matthew 9, debate about Jesus' identity and ministry intensified. Alongside these arguments, Matthew describes his own calling. There were few identified resources available for establishing this heavenly kingdom, especially given the vast opportunities seen by Jesus.

Discovery

Identify the growing opposition to Jesus' ministry in Matthew 8:20 and 8:34, and then in Matthew 9:3, 11, 14, 24, 30 and 34. In what ways did Jesus understand this opposition (Matthew 9:14–17)? Matthew's commentary of what Jesus' healing ministry meant for Jesus in 8:17 can also be considered in this context.

What accusations were made in these passages and in what ways was Jesus criticised and ridiculed? Explore these accusations against Jesus in terms of his challenging of the existing theology, culture, and the worship practices he saw around him.

Consider the resistance to Jesus' ministry described in Matthew 12, and the way Jesus responded to it. What commentary does Matthew provide on what he sees as happening to Jesus?

Reflection

Matthew 12 is pivotal in unveiling Jesus' identity. The quote from Isaiah 42, the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in forgiveness, the kingdom of heaven, Jesus as 'the Son of Man', and the will of 'my Father in heaven' establishes the context for Jesus' death (Matthew 12:15–21, 38–42).

The more the opposition increases, the more the truth of what Jesus' presence as God-with-us means for him emerges:

Oh the new mingling! Oh the blend contrary to all expectation! The one who is, becomes. The uncreated is created. The uncontainable is contained through a thinking soul, mediating between godhead and the thickness of flesh. The one who enriches becomes a beggar; for he begs for my own flesh so that I might become rich in his divinity. The one who is full becomes empty; for he empties himself of his glory for a little time so that I might share in his fullness ... I received the image and I did not protect it; he received a share in my flesh so that he might even save the image and make deathless the flesh.¹

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Holy Passover*, 45.633–36.

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Ebenezer Alfred Tydeman,² in a similar vein, wrote of a friend ‘whose faithful love is more than all the world to me’, and who sought ‘the lost ... at the cost of heavenly rank and earthly fame’:

It was a lonely path he trod,
From every human soul apart;
Known only to himself and God
Was all the grief that filled his heart,
 Yet from the track
 He turned not back,
Till where I lay in want and shame,
He found me – Blessed be his name!

Then dawned at last that day of dread,
When desolate, yet undismayed,
With wearied frame and thorn-crowned head,
He, God-forsaken, man-betrayed,
 Was then made sin
 On Calvary,
And, dying there in grief and shame,
He saved me – Blessed be his name!³

Next time

The Sermon on the Mount is placed by Matthew between the passages discussed so far. How does Matthew’s description of Jesus’ life and ministry set the context for the Sermon, and in what ways does the Sermon enrich an understanding of the events described in the surrounding chapters?

² ‘Tydeman, C. A. (Ebenezer Alfred),’ <http://www.praise.org.uk/hymnauthor/tydeman-ebenezer-alfred/>.

³ C. A. (Ebenezer Alfred) Tydeman, ‘I Have a Friend Whose Faithful Love,’ <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/156>.

The Sermon on the Mount

Introduction

Matthew 5 to 7 provides a lengthy description of Jesus' early ministry. We learn of the character of Jesus' ministry, of the nature of God as Father and of the heavenly kingdom that is present through Jesus. We also learn of the need to be vigilant about internal attitudes as well as external actions.

The Sermon on the Mount is structured in several sections. The first part of the Sermon details blessings and encouragements given to those who live aligned with Jesus' teaching. It also affirms their identity as 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world' (Matthew 5:1–16). In the second part, Jesus moves from describing authentic relationships with God and other people to discussing the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17–6:4). Matthew 6:1–4 provides a bridge between the redefined 'law' of Jesus and the last part where the focus is on our relationship with God as Father (Matthew 6:5–7:27).

Discovery

Look for parallels between the blessings nominated in the creation narratives in Genesis and the first part of the Sermon (Matthew 5:1–16). Also look for similarities between the blessings and curses described in Deuteronomy 26 to 30 and the last section of the Sermon (Matthew 6:5–7:27).

Consider the values Jesus describes in the second section, and the ways in which he reframes Mosaic and Gentile law and beliefs (Matthew 5:17–6:4).

Consider the different aspects of knowing God as our heavenly Father that Jesus identifies, including ways in which they connect with our life as part of his creation, and what they mean for us in our communities and families.

In what ways does Jesus speak of the kingdom of God, and what does this mean for living together in this world as God's people?

Reflection

The Sermon on the Mount is a Father-kingdom manifesto. It sets out the blessings and rewards that are promised to those aligned by their trust and worship with God's creational intentions for humanity. It describes some of the consequences of rejecting this life, as well as detailing several of the dangers that come to those who live as God's family.

All is set out in terms of living together in the kingdom of God. As Father to his people, God is faithful in understanding their needs and in providing for them through creation, even given the complexities that his provision involves in our brief existence in his world. The Lord's Prayer sets out this dependence, reminds

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us of our transience and imperfections,⁴ and points us towards a coming time when holiness, righteousness and reconciliation are evident in a renewed creation-kingdom.

Those who heard the original sermon ‘were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes’ (Matthew 7:28, 29). Perhaps their response was because hearing Jesus commence his sermon by pronouncing blessings resulted in many having a fresh experience of *being* blessed, affirmed and encouraged. Perhaps the Spirit of the living God came upon people in ways prophesied in their Scriptures and fulfilled later under Jesus’ ascended authority at Pentecost (e.g. Numbers 11:24–29; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Joel 2:18–32; Acts 2:1–47).

Next time

In what ways does the Sermon on the Mount set the scene for Jesus’ ministry, and for his violent and brutal crucifixion?

⁴ Bishop Steven Croft, *Seven Reasons to Ban the Lord’s Prayer* (<http://www.sheffield.anglican.org/blog/bishop-of-sheffield/seven-reasons-to-ban-the-lord-s-prayer> 2015).

The plot to kill Jesus

Introduction

Matthew 26 begins with Jesus making a simple and somewhat blunt assessment of what was ahead. There is a stark contrast between the disciples' response to the woman who anointed Jesus, and both her care for him and Simon the leper's hospitality. The intimacy of the upper room meal and Jesus' deep communion with his Father in Gethsemane are similarly disrupted by the anger of his disciples, the betrayal of Judas, Jesus' arrest and Peter's denial.

Discovery

Two voices in Matthew 26 dominate the passage: one announces doom and immanent death, and the other provides comfort, affirmation and resurrection promise. These two perspectives serve as reminders of the last verses of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7–28). Read Matthew 7 and 26 and identify ways in which they provide insights into each other.

Consider what Jesus means by referring to Zechariah 13:7, and look at ways in which Psalms 22 and 69 help us understand what Jesus means.

Reflection

Passages in the Hebrew Bible about judgement provide a context for Matthew's description of the people's rejection of Jesus (see Jeremiah 8 for example) and can help us make sober reflections on our own dispositions and environments. God's love, holiness, goodness, truth and righteousness all act together in harmony and with integrity. God is not swayed or forced from being who he is and fulfilling what he has planned by human or spiritual evil. He does not deal with sin and wickedness through an internal conflict between himself as Father, Son and Spirit. His unity is highlighted and emphasised in his refusal to embrace and endorse that which is contrary to his own person and identity. The torment we experience from evil's power, pollution and presence is part of evil's violent violation and intense indifference to God's person and to his gracious and merciful actions for our welfare and health.

Jesus carefully teaches his followers ways in which they can face their own failure and recover from its impact on themselves. His mission was not to avoid the disaster, but to travel through it. The contrast between the voices of the religious and political status quo, and the words of the suffering one who would be raised from death may help us deal with the situations in which we live. His hope is not only that we might learn from him and be liberated by him, but that we may become messengers of his grace and mercy in a troubled and turbulent world.

Next time

In what ways do the deaths of Judas and Jesus represent the polarised positions in which those present at Golgotha find themselves?

The death of Jesus

Introduction

No guard was needed at Judas' tomb. And no 'blood money', no silver-pieces were available for collection immediately after Jesus' death (Matthew 27:6). The blood of these two lives – Judas' and Jesus' – was shed, along with the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, while another – that of Barabbas – was unexpectedly spared. The drama of Matthew 27 includes scenes of Herod's wife unsuccessfully warning Herod about Jesus' innocence, Simon of Cyrene faithfully carrying Jesus' cross, and the women with Joseph responding to his horrible death. Just as Moses exhorted the people of his day (Deuteronomy 30:11–20), so Matthew describes Jesus' death in ways that encourage the first readers of his Gospel to choose wisely for themselves about life and death.

Discovery

Build on insights shared from looking at Matthew 27 to see in what ways the decisions Jesus made ultimately meant choosing death rather than opting for his own survival.

Identify ways in which his choices in this chapter set the context for his resurrection. In what ways does Jeremiah 8 reflect the mindset of those who were present, as well as provide warnings for ourselves when reading of Jesus' crucifixion?

What other Old Testament passages come to mind as you read the account of Jesus' death in Matthew 27?

Reflection

In recording the centurion's testimony that 'Truly this man was God's Son' (Matthew 27:54), Matthew encourages his readers to hear the gospel of the one about whom he is writing. The voice of a Roman centurion, possibly in charge of the crucifixions, says what the Jewish authorities and Roman rulers rejected. The centurion became a spokesperson for those, including Jews, who had listened to Jesus and accepted his message. This Son of God is Immanuel not just in the comforts of everyday life, but in life's worst circumstances, including death. He dies with humility, even given the horror of the unwelcome and false accusations against him, and the pain of being tortured by crucifixion.

Matthew, the accountant, in writing the Jesus story, knew that the first century believers who would read his Gospel might face, and were perhaps already experiencing, persecution and even martyrdom. In hearing about the suffering and death of Jesus, these early believers may have been asking Matthew, as a disciple of Jesus, to keep reminding them of his story and so be instructed and encouraged

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through their crises. Matthew tells us his story of Jesus so we, like them, know how to press on, even when God seems to have abandoned us.

The last chapter of Matthew's Gospel describes the impossibility of guarding Jesus' tomb against his Father's affirmation at his baptism and transfiguration. The grieving women became unexpected heralds of Jesus' permanent presence, promised 'to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). Being baptized into the name of the triune God, of God as Father, Son and Spirit, identifies us with him as ascended Lord. He has been given complete authority and has promised to remain with us forever (cf. Psalm 23:6).

Encouragement, comfort and participation

Themes about God's presence from Paul's letter to the Philippians

Paul wanted his readers to know God's presence in their struggles and persecution. He wanted them to know the way Jesus lived as he worked with his Father to renew humanity for the glory of heavenly citizenship, even in the face of those who are 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). Paul included rich insights in his exhortations about what it means for Christians to live together as they await these realities to be fully realised.

Living is Christ and dying is gain

Introduction

A key text for these studies is Philippians 2:1, where Paul's mention of 'encouragement in Christ', 'consolation from love', 'sharing in the Spirit', and 'compassion and sympathy', forms the basis for having fullness of joy.⁵ Philippians 1 commences with a greeting and a prayer, and ends with Paul's resolve to rejoice while in prison. His joy from experiencing God's encouragement in Christ, God's comforting love, and the presence of God's Spirit gives a proto-Trinitarian understanding of God's personal being and inner-relatedness.⁶ They reveal essential aspects of Paul's understanding of Jesus as Christ, and of his victory over death.

Discovery

Keeping in mind the personal setting of the letter, consider ways in which Philippians 1 provides a basis for Paul's proposition 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy' at the start of chapter 2:

What encouragement did Paul find in Christ?

What comfort and consolation did he experience in God's love?

What evidence did he have of sharing or participating in the work of the Holy Spirit?

In what ways did he see these realities coming together to bring compassion, affection and sympathy?

What did Paul indicate would bring him greatest joy?

Reflection

As Paul faced either being put to death as a criminal or being released from prison, he worked through his own narrative about his situation. His primary priority was exalting Christ rather than being ashamed of him, regardless of his future circumstances. His declaration that 'For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain' was not mere rhetoric, but actual reality (Philippians 1:21). His preference was to

⁵ ESV: 'any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy'.

⁶ Paul's mention of consolation or comfort 'from love' in Philippians 2:1 may well have God's love in mind, and that love being from the Father. Romans 5:5, 8, 8:39; 2 Corinthians 13:11, 14; Ephesians 2:4 and 2 Thessalonians 3:5 all speak of God's love, while Ephesians 3:19 mentions Christ's love in the context of his prayer about the Father naming all families, and strengthening people by his Spirit. In Romans 15:30 Paul writes about the 'love of the Spirit'. For Paul, God's love then flows from God as Father, Son and Spirit, as well as between them.

‘share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again’, and so he urged them not to be daunted by opposition, but to persist in the ‘privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well’ (Philippians 1:26, 29).

His greeting and prayer set the context for his confidence. The ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ would fulfil his purposes, regardless of human situations (Philippians 1:1–11). Moreover, God’s people would know grace and peace in their struggles through the ‘compassion of Christ Jesus’, a compassion which would evoke community love and produce abundant purity and freedom from blame (Philippians 2:1). Paul believed that his release from prison would come with their prayers and the ‘help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ’, and would result in Christ being exalted (Philippians 1:19, 20). Alternatively, his own death would still be a way in which Christ would be exalted.

Paul’s worldview had God as its centre, and not God acting as a detached observer, inclined to help from a distance at various random times. Through the gospel Paul received and preached, communities sprang to life as living evidence of God’s intention to create something quite different from the power-centred regime that imprisoned Paul and rejected Paul’s testimony.

As we consider Paul’s testimony from prison, with his awareness of God, and of the Philippian Christians being with him in spirit, something of the same encouragement, comfort, compassion and sympathy, that they knew through sharing life together, can help us. May the revelation of God that informed Paul and these early believers break through freshly as we contemplate Paul’s letter to God’s people at Philippi.

Next time

With God as Father, Son and Spirit at the centre of his worldview in chapter 1, Paul explores the life and death of Jesus not merely as a paradigm for the Philippian Christian community, but as a divine empowering and enabling of life together as God’s people (Philippians 2).

Shining like stars

Introduction

Paul longed for the Philippian Christians with ‘the compassion of Christ Jesus’ and wanted Christ preached ‘out of love’ (Philippians 1:8, 16). He disapproved of those who preached ‘Christ out of selfish ambition’, but was pleased Christ was at least being proclaimed (Philippians 1:15–18). His focus was not primarily on the negative impact this false ministry had on him. With the ‘help of Spirit of Jesus Christ’ and their prayers, he hoped to be released from prison and to visit them again (Philippians 1:19–26). Paul’s life was more than a mental nod to doctrine. He wanted Christ proclaimed in ways that would help those who heard his gospel.

Discovery

Explore ways in which the themes in Philippians 2:1 are developed in chapter 2. Consider what Paul meant in Philippians 2:1–5 in the light of people who opposed his message, including those who preached ‘Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment’ (Philippians 1:17, cf. 1:28).

What does it mean not to murmur or argue with other people while still opposing those in the community who are ‘seeking their own interests’ (Philippians 2:21)? What mind do the Gospels suggest that Christ Jesus had for such people (Philippians 2:5)?

Reflection

The ‘if then’ in verse one means ‘since’. The text that follows is an exhortation by Paul in which he looks to persuade his readers about who God is and the ways in which God in Christ works. The four ‘any’ statements have a cascading sequence. The first mentions Christ, the second points to the Father, the third refers to the Spirit, while the fourth encapsulates all three. The Philippians are to have the same mind, love and ‘full accord’ as the Father, the Son and the Spirit. This unity of life is centred on doing nothing ‘from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard[ing] others as better than yourselves’. It means looking ‘not to your own interests, but to the interests of others’ (Philippians 2:1–5). This is not an idealistic or pietistic principal to which the Philippians should aspire; it is a participation in the life of God himself.

There is encouragement for those who suffer for their faith since Christ’s exaltation by his Father means more than simply conquering enemies. It means helping God’s people. Christ, in the mystery of divine grace, regards us ‘as better than himself’ (Philippians 2:3). His is true humanity.

Christ’s encouragement is as Comforter, Advocate and Intercessor, and links with the Spirit also being Comforter, Advocate and Intercessor. Both come to God’s

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people from the Father and act for his glory. All that Christ did, and all that he does now, is in, and flows from, God's love by God's Spirit. Christ's disregard for grasping or exploiting 'equality with God' expresses the Father's love (Philippians 2:6–11).

We are called to consider the welfare of others ahead of our own, and not live conceited and selfish lives filled with ambition and pride. We are to 'work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in [us], enabling [us] both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians 2:12, 13). The Father's love gives us confidence that we, in and with Christ, by the Spirit, work for his glory and pleasure (Philippians 1:9–11).

Paul wrote of the 'help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:19). Whether he meant Christ's own spirit or the Holy Spirit, the communion and unity of the Godhead are revealed through Christ's humanity. We share in God's gifts of life and goodness (cf. 2 Peter 1:3, 4), and remain in the love and grace of God (Philippians 1:8, 19). All Christ's encouragement, all the Father's love, all our sharing in the Holy Spirit, all the compassion and sympathy that comes to us as God's people combine to bring us true joy (cf. Luke 15:7; 1 Peter 1:8, 9).

Paul urges them to 'do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may 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 2:14, 15). In our difficulties and in our delights, a wonderful witness occurs, however feeble our light might seem! Paul favoured true glory, not naïve consensus (Philippians 3:1, 2)!

Next time

In chapter 3, Paul not only contrasts his former life with his present one, he compares life now with 'the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' which will reveal the full glory of our heavenly citizenship, and our transformation from this 'body of our humiliation' to one 'conformed to the body of his glory' (Philippians 3:13, 14, 20, 21).

Friends of the cross with heavenly citizenship

Introduction

Paul continues with his theme, writing in more detail about worshipping ‘in the Spirit of God’ and having confidence in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:3). He contrasts this with ‘righteousness under the law’, which he discards ‘because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Philippians 3:8). Righteousness is a faith-gift with a heavenly reward, and is based on ‘the cross of Christ’ which heralded ‘the power of his resurrection’ (Philippians 3:10, 18).

Discovery

Look for ways in which Paul’s declarations in Philippians 3 build on his earlier thoughts. For example, he has already mentioned God’s work in Philippians 1:6 and 2:12, 13.

In what ways does Paul develop his thoughts about who God is and what God does, especially relating to his teaching about the cross and resurrection. In what ways does Paul develop Philippians 1:21, that ‘living is Christ and dying is gain’ in this chapter? How do your insights help explain Paul’s expression ‘the sharing of his sufferings’ (Philippians 3:10)?

What lessons are there that can help us cope with opposition from those who have a different approach to Paul’s? How can reflecting on our personal past, our present situation and our future hopes help us?

Reflection

In Philippians 3:7–9, Paul repeats his contrast of self-trust and being found in Christ four times, each time more strongly. His identification with Christ links back to verses two and three where he describes himself as one who worshipped in the Spirit of God and boasted in Christ Jesus, and where he distanced himself from ‘those who mutilate the flesh’.

Philippians 3:9–10 indicates Paul’s longing to know Christ, and so know his resurrection power and share in his sufferings. In this way, Paul hoped to become ‘like him in his death’ if ‘somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead’. As Paul had just discussed two kinds of righteousness, his focus was not primarily on our future resurrection, but on living now in its reality. Christ’s resurrection power and participating in Christ’s sufferings are part of one bundle. Paul wrote about more than receiving the benefits of Christ’s sufferings while escaping his own struggles! His mind was on Christ, who, now raised, is with his people in their sufferings, conforming them to his death, and bringing them to resurrection (Philippians 3:12–14).

This emphasis on Christ’s crucifixion is strong. Knowing Christ, receiving the power of his resurrection and sharing his sufferings all involve ‘becoming like him

in his death' (Philippians 3:10). This worldview ends triumphalism and perfectionism. It is a maturity to be lived in, and those who 'press on' with Paul are those who press into the truths he has identified. This involves humility of the kind mentioned in chapter 2.

In Philippians 3:17–21 Paul returns to his initial theme in verse 2 of this chapter. There Paul warned of doom coming for those consumed by self-righteousness, including false shepherds in the flock of Christ; repeating an earlier concern. True citizens of heaven become 'like [Christ] in his death', and are friends of the 'cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:10, 18). They look for resurrection power in this life and bodily resurrection in the next.

All this is the work of Christ, whom Paul so much 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).

Next time

In Philippians 4, Paul continues his theme of personal and community joy in all circumstances. His basis for rejoicing is in the presence of God's Spirit and the faith-righteousness that has come to him in believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul longed for the welfare of those at Philippi among whom he worshipped, and wanted to be with them in order that they, with him, might know the encouragement, comfort and community that God provides his people.

Joy in working together – side by side

Introduction

Paul did not work on his own. Women and men ‘struggled beside [him] in the work of the gospel’ (Philippians 4:3, cf. 2:19–29, 3:14–18). His final pleas for the Philippian Christians continue his focus on joy in difficult times (Philippians 1:4, 18, 25, 2:2, 17, 18, 28, 29, 3:1, 17, 4:1, 4, 10).

Paul’s concerns were not unhelpful anxieties since peace came to him in making them ‘known to God’ (Philippians 4:6, 7). His contentment was not the result of pleasant circumstances but arose from Christ strengthening him and satisfying authentic needs ‘according to [God’s] riches in glory in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 4:19).

Discovery

What does this letter from Paul to the Philippians teach us about working together ‘side by side’ (Philippians 4:3 ESV)? What advice is there for dealing with Christian leaders who work from different assumptions?

When Paul says that ‘in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God’, what has he shared about the person and action of God that encourages this ‘prayer and supplication with thanksgiving’ (Philippians 4:5)?

Philippians 4:7 to 9 is bookended with references to the ‘peace of God’ and the ‘God of peace’ (cf. Philippians 1:2). Is there any difference in these terms, and if there is, what might Paul have had in mind? How do these references to peace connect with verse 8 of chapter 4? What has Paul indicated about these qualities being in Jesus Christ?

Reflection

It would be a mistake to read Paul’s encouragements for consensus and harmony as suggesting he wanted sycophantic spiritual obsequiousness or servility from other people. He was not looking for acolytes subordinated to elite clergy, but for a community where people lived in harmony with humility. Nor did Paul suggest that leaders are beyond question, comment, complaint or criticism. He made strong statements regarding certain kinds of leadership, and set a pattern for discernment which others were expected to follow. The Christ whom he proclaimed was not reticent when it came to assessing the religious leaders of his day. It is the approach of this Christ that Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to have and to agree on together.

Central to Paul’s concerns about false leadership and regarding misguided communities was his longing for them to focus on caring for each other in ways that would bring an abundance of truth, honour, justice, purity, delight,

commendation, praise and excellence! These were the qualities he saw in Christ Jesus and knew he lacked when pursuing his own self-righteousness. These were evidences of the 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' which enabled the Philippian Christians to be a people 'standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel' (Philippians 1:19, 27, cf. 4:3). Their 'sharing in the Spirit' was linked with the encouragement they knew in Christ, and the comfort and consolation of God's love. Rather than ambition and greed, 'compassion and sympathy' would bring joy and peace (Philippians 2:1, 2). Confidence in self-centred achievement would be replaced by worshipping in the Spirit of God and presenting Jesus Christ as the Lord described in the hymn about his death and exaltation (Philippians 2:5–11, 3:3). Paul's prayer would be answered in this way (Philippians 4:23).

Philippians 2:1 provides a rich launching pad for considering this letter. Time and again it focuses our minds on who God is and what he does. We see not only divine qualities but learn of the Father, Son and Spirit working together for humanity's benefit. We are drawn into deeper understandings of our lives personally and together, and are captivated by promises of being heavenly citizens because 'He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:21). This surely provides us with every reason to press on to 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10).

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Compassion and care

Hearing God's restorative narrative amid life's complexities

In outlining some thoughts relating to life's troubles, tragedies, trials and triumphs, these studies commence by reflecting on God as the living God. They then move towards an exploration of various ways an understanding of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus can help us in the delights, difficulties and dangers we meet. While there is always much more that could be added, Paul's words in Philippians 2:1ff can help us, just as they heartened Paul and have done for countless others.

God is: we are

Introduction

Sooner or later life presents us with situations where self-determined right-wrong morality no longer provides adequate answers. The second Genesis creation narrative assigns such analysis to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with its deadly fruit. The alternative worldview contrasts this tree with a tree of life, setting up a relational life-death ethical realm. True relationships are firstly with God, who is Creator and covenant LORD. They include humanity and the environment in which we live. Trusting God's self-disclosure, and being aligned with his intentions is life-giving, while rejecting this relational dynamic leads to death.

Israel's history describes their struggle with this narrative. The climax of Deuteronomy records the blessings and curses that can be expected from these two alternatives, while a central theme in Leviticus concerns atonement. Israel's later wisdom literature reflects on other factors affecting this polarity between trust and denial. In the wisdom writings, life is described as transient, intermingled with seasons of delight (as in Ecclesiastes). It involves inexplicable suffering and hopeful restoration (as in Job). It brings lament, thanksgiving and anticipation (as in the Psalms). It may include relational intimacy (as in the Song of Songs), while parental provision and guidance struggles to discern wisdom from folly (as in Proverbs). Israel also learnt that enemy invasion and natural disaster do not always result from disobedience (as in the books of Daniel and Joel).

Discovery

In exploring the Old Testament understandings of God's character, look for passages where authors affirm who they saw God to be and where they rejected the ways other nations understood God.⁷ Identifying the relevant cultural and social settings may increase your understanding of the passages you select.

From the beginning of Scripture, humanity is said to be created in God's image and likeness, and so is understood as being unique among all creatures. Consider ways in which this understanding connects with the view of community, parenting and family evident in the passages you have selected, and how it informs the overall world view described. In what ways does this view of creation and humanity inform our understanding of who God is and the way he acts?

Reflection

The Old Testament describes God as perfect and wise, beyond our complete understanding, and not part of the creation in which we live. Everything God does

⁷ Consider using the search/find function on a digital device with a Bible installed or use a Concordance or Bible reference resource to find key words and thoughts.

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is good, righteous, holy, loving and true. He is seen to be faithful to his promises and purposes, whatever the situations and events that overtake humanity might otherwise suggest. God's integrity and identity are consistent, whether explored in Mosaic testimony, Davidic psalmody, Hebrew prophetic testimony, or in other Old Testament books. God seeks the welfare and blessing of his people and the creation in which we live, and does so in each time and season of life. This intentional movement of God towards humanity is known in his holiness, love, truth, righteousness and goodness, and comes to humanity as his grace and mercy, bringing his peace, comfort and joy. Resistance to God is described in various ways and inevitably, though not necessarily immediately, brings decay and disaster. These accounts raise many questions relating to the issues faced by the authors and the communities to which they belonged.

God does not act inconsistently. God's love and goodness, for example, do not contradict his holiness and righteousness. There is complete harmony within God between his holiness and righteousness on the one hand and his love and goodness on the other. When God acts, who he is becomes clearer. Nonetheless, humanity does not always willingly accept God's intentions and purposes, and sees them at times as hostile to its own fallen goals.

Humanity, male and female, images God, and is created to live in God's good creation. This image is always operational: humanity positively declares who God is by faithful responses or negatively by futile rejections. God's nature can be seen more clearly as we understand our human stories in the context of the biblical testimony given to us.

Next time

The Scriptures often speak of God using language about God as the living God, and about God being eternal. His person and action can be further understood by looking at these and related biblical expressions.

God is the living God – 1

Introduction

God is not described in the Bible as a part of creation, but neither is God depicted apart from his concern for and involvement in his creation. God is not seen as a remote, detached and uncaring deity, but as present, connected and compassionate. Although he is constantly seen to interact with and be involved in his creation, God remains eternal and other than creation. Language outlining and detailing what this means is not easily constructed and inevitably uses metaphor and symbol.

Discovery

God is eternal, and with this understanding other descriptions follow. Explore different sections of the Old Testament to find some of the ways in which God's being is described as eternal, and what language is used concerning God being eternal.

God is said to be living and active. As the giver and creator of life, he is present to and involved in human affairs. Look for passages in the Old Testament which speak of God as the living God, or which use related terms. Enrich your understanding of the ways these communities understood God by finding passages which speak of his presence.

Reflection

The language used for God in the Old Testament includes descriptions of him in terms of *who he is not*. For example, unlike us he is not mortal and is not visible. God is also referred to in terms of *who he is* in ways that remind us of our limitations and imperfections, of who we are not. For example, God is all powerful, all knowing and all wise, which we are not. Terms like finite and infinite are inadequate as humanity images God's eternal being (as in Psalm 8 and Ecclesiastes 3:11).

God is the living God, ever present to creation and working for its final destiny. Biblical writers understood God as the living God in their cultural settings and using their own language, both of which God uses for his purposes without necessarily endorsing any individual culture. We are to read Scripture wisely to discern its infallible, unfailing and unwavering message. We are to understand his inspired word, and to be trained 'in righteousness [and] equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

In exploring ways in which the Scriptures describe who God is and who he is not, it is evident that God is called by different names. Israel's covenant God is known by YHWH or Yahweh, announced as Adonai or LORD / GOD. Mentions of LORD commence with the second creation narrative and describe his relationship with his people (Genesis 2:4–4:26, 6:1–8, 7:1ff, 12:1–24:1, cf. Nehemiah 9:6ff). This

naming of God defined him in ways that helped the Hebrew people and the Jewish nation understand that he was not like the gods of other nations.

In the Old Testament, God is spoken of as the living God or in similar terms many times. The Genesis narrative about life and death links the stories of Abel, Enoch and Noah to God's concern for life. Joseph's story occupies much of the book, and provides a bridge between Abraham and Moses. Deuteronomy reflects on these accounts with the Exodus in mind (e.g. Deuteronomy 5:23–27, 30:11–20).

The Pentateuch – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – sets the context for the books of the former prophets – Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings – as well as the latter ones – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets.⁸ Whether during the rise of empire or its decline, whether in exile or on return, God is the living God who invests in the welfare of his people (e.g. Ezekiel 18). God's lack of pleasure in death is evident in his provision of renewal and restoration (as in Ezekiel 34 and 37). As the minor prophets assert, 'the righteous live by their faith' (Habakkuk 2:4). They know grace 'not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit', and believe that 'he who has torn us, he will heal us, ... he will revive us that we may live before him' (Zechariah 4:6, 7; Hosea 6:1–3).

Next time

In what ways does the living God as described in the Old Testament deal with human failure and rebellion? What understandings emerge about tensions between apparent divine indifference on the one hand and seemingly immoral and inappropriate action on the other hand?

⁸ The first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) form the Pentateuch or the Law. Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are the former prophets, with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve minor prophets as the latter prophets. The Wisdom books are part of the Writings. They include the poetry books (Job, Psalms and Proverbs) and two of the Scrolls (the *Megillot*), Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Ruth, Esther and Lamentations complete the Scrolls, with Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel completing the Writings.

God is the living God – 2

Introduction

God's goodness is identified in Genesis 1 and insisted upon throughout the Old Testament. God's holiness, righteousness, faithfulness and love are also indicated throughout these Scriptures.

The failure of the couple in Eden and the violence that quickly emerges is vividly portrayed. The conflicts between these destructive and dehumanising events and human efforts to fulfil the initial command to achieve fruitfulness and abundance are evident. The authors develop a narrative about the ways in which God addresses these tensions. While the Hebrew Bible recognises the lack of easy answers to these issues, they insist on certain views of who God is and the ways in which he responds to evil and rebellion.

Discovery

Explore the Old Testament to find passages describing God as faithful and trustworthy in difficult circumstances. Look for ways in which his reliability and honour are identified when humanity is being confronted by evil and wickedness.

What does God do to show his care and sympathy for humanity? In what ways are God's mercy and compassion towards humanity described?

God's reign is mentioned frequently in the Psalms, often in terms of the Davidic kingship. What are the characteristics of the ways God's reign impacts on humanity? Do the Psalms picture God's reign differently from other sections of the Old Testament, and, if so, in what ways?

Reflection

The Hebrew Bible wrestles with the tension resulting from God being understood as pure and untainted by evil, and God seeming to be at least somewhat ineffective in defeating and destroying it. This dilemma is not only examined using theological and social concepts, but by exploring and reflecting on diverse lived experiences. As a result, several principles inform their belief systems.

Firstly, God is not seen as the author of evil or the source of sin. Sin and evil are not in this sense 'original' parts of his good creation, however deep their history may be (Genesis 1 to 4). Evil is believed to lack ultimate authenticity. It is considered parasitic, acting as a powerful and seductive counterfeit counterpart to God's goodness, righteousness, holiness, love and truth (e.g. Psalms 23, 24, 100, 111).

Secondly, God is not presented as passive or indifferent regarding evil (e.g. in Habakkuk 1 the prophet believes God does not watch evil without bringing judgement). God does not idly 'allow' it to ruin his creation, even though sickness, futility, frailty, persecution and bewilderment seem almost inevitably to suggest

otherwise. Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon consider the impact of these types of events on those who believe in God and those who do not (Psalms 1 to 18 give rich responses to a range of events).

The Scriptural testimony is that, although God is not in 'control' of evil as its cause or originator, God acts sovereignly and responsibly in creation to assert his purposes and character. He reigns, despite what often seems to humanity to be the case (cf. Psalms 115, 135). In the Hebrew Bible, God's presence to his creation is fundamentally seen in terms of blessings and curses, of life and death, of encouraging faith and rejecting pride (as in Habakkuk 2:1–4). Yet the reality that everyday events often seem to deny this duality is also faced, and is considered within his love, holiness, goodness, righteousness and faithfulness (as in Lamentations 3:21–26; Habakkuk 3:16–19). God's mercies are thought to be ongoing and generous, and his grace is understood as being offered freely. His mercy and grace are given without ameliorating his disapproval and disdain for human defiance and disobedience. In acknowledging human suffering, sickness, frailty and transience, and in being aware of famine, war, persecution and other difficulties, the Hebrew Bible covers grief, lament and pain (as in Psalms 40 to 43). It also identifies future hope, both in this life, and in the later writings, resurrection-life is also more explicitly considered (as in Daniel 12:13).

Next time

In the New Testament, the theme of the living God continues. The prophetic introduction 'As the LORD lives ...' was now present among them. In what ways was Jesus not merely another prophet, a helpful miracle worker and a spiritual mystic? What does it mean for him to be the living Word, the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the Son of Man. In what ways is he seen as High Priest and sacrificial Lamb, as God with humanity for humanity as a human person?

God acts in Jesus Christ

Introduction

Two major themes dominate the Pentateuch. The atonement-centred restoration narrative about the Exodus is set in the context of relational responses to Israel's covenant LORD and GOD. Life is said to prosper when aligned with God's creational intentions, while decay and doom awaits those who reject his covenant. While the events of Israel's history map this broad pattern out, it is also evident that there are seasons when the 'wicked' prosper (as described in Psalms 14 and 73), and when the fragility of life appears to dismantle the efforts of the wise.

The centuries before Christ saw the development of Jewish wisdom literature. This, with Maccabean revulsion against the Seleucid empire, became significant factors in the Jewish environment that existed through Roman occupation. Heralded by John the Baptist, Jesus emerged as a messianic leader who cared for the disenfranchised as a compassionate healer and more-than-a-prophet. The Gospel writers describe him as self-aware of his own calling, and focused on showing that the reign of God would release the people of God from relational tyranny and personal guilt. Jesus' message was that the reign of God meant forgiveness of sins and baptism in and with the Holy Spirit. Reconciliation with God and other people would bring relational realignment and release from personal, social and national oppression. This restoration message was initially for Israel, and then for all nations, including the coastlands Isaiah nominated. Jesus' message recalibrated the descriptions of Israel's history provided by the Pharisees' religious morality, the Sadducees' political strategies and truncated Scriptures, the Zealots' militant nationalism or the Essenes' exclusive separatism.

Discovery

In what ways does the New Testament reinforce Old Testament teaching that God is perfect and wise, and that everything he does is good, righteous, holy, loving and true?

The Old Testament sees humanity, male and female, created to live as God's image and likeness in God's good creation. Explore ways in which Jesus' teaching ministry reinforces and develops this perspective.

The New Testament presents Jesus using names such as Immanuel, Son of God, Son of Man, Saviour and Messiah. Consider the ways in which this New Testament witness affirms God as both all powerful, all knowing and all wise, and as the living God who is ever present to creation and working towards its final renewal and restoration.

In what ways does this reaffirm and/or reframe Old Testament teaching about evil and sin as powerful and seductive counterfeits acting against God's goodness, righteousness, holiness, love and truth? Consider ways in which Jesus' ministry

describes an understanding about sickness, futility, frailty, persecution and bewilderment.

Reflection

The Old Testament describes God as fulfilling his purposes in history by being present to his creation and by being with his people. Creation is not seen as a machine operated by a Remote-Controller, but as a world in which God is personally and faithfully present and active. The New Testament develops this theme and sees God in Christ as Word become human person, working to reconcile all things to himself (John 1:6–18; Romans 5:6–11; 2 Corinthians 5:14–21; Ephesians 2:14–21; Colossians 1:21–24).

God reveals himself in Jesus Christ as a trustworthy and faithful Creator who is generous, gracious and merciful in achieving his purposes and keeping his promises (Romans 2:1–4; 1 Peter 4:19; James 1:17). Judgement is finalised by restoration; and renewal exposes the futility of resistance (Acts 3:12–26).

God acts in Jesus Christ and by his Holy Spirit, writing a different narrative about us and regarding creation to the story that evil presents in the daily horrors that happen to and by humanity, including as a result of our own failings (Acts 1:1–11, 10:34–43; Romans 5:1ff, 8:1ff; 1 Corinthians 12:1ff; Ephesians 2:14–21; Galatians 4:1ff).

Central to God's plan is Jesus' death, his willingly going to the Place of the Skull where all the accusations and taunts of the false logic and sinister twists of sin and evil come against him (Galatians 3:6–18; 1 Peter 2:21–25). He dies not only with us but for us, and does something to us and by us, establishing a new humanity that lives in and for and by his resurrection glory. God is about identification and participation not replacement or exclusion. At every point, forensic and judicial issues are set in the divine-human personal and relational restorative narrative.

Next time

In what ways does the scandal of the crucifixion of Jesus establish the reign of God, bring reconciliation to humanity, and resolve the dilemmas that confront humanity in its mortality and failure?

Jesus reigns and reconciles

Introduction

God is naturally aware of evil and the ways in which it functions, and evil fails to present any ultimate or alternative reality as rebellion against God is fundamentally absurd. God exercises authority over evil, acting neither as its author nor by being idly passive about its devastating effects. Jesus defeated death and sin at the cross, with his resurrection bringing life and freedom to his people and release from bondage to his creation.

The Evil One has no last laugh on God for 'rescuing' humanity apart from humanity. Christ intercedes and is victorious as a human person. Humanity in him is victorious over the vile and vicious accusations and actions that seek to destroy it. The majesty and glory of God in Christ appear to those who reject his message to be foolishness and scandal, and weakness, humiliation and poverty. This is evident in all aspects of Jesus' full participation without sin in our human story, with all its depravity, defilement and desolation.

Discovery

Reflect on New Testament passages that speak about the victory of God and the defeat of sin, death and evil powers. In what ways does Jesus overcome these opponents?

What is the significance of him being human in his battle against sin, death and evil, and what does the ministry of the Holy Spirit bring to his life and ministry.

'Jesus is Lord and victor, as well as servant and victim'. In what ways do the New Testament writers agree or disagree with this statement?

In what ways is Jesus' victory over sin, death and evil seen as bringing hope, joy and peace to the people of God, and so to the world?

Reflection

Jesus was not born into a cultural, political or religious vacuum (Galatians 4:4ff). His life indicates God's response to the ways evil and sin operate; to the vicious and violent agendas of rebellious humanity. While this defiance seems potent and effective in implementing its cruel and deadly consequences, something altogether different is necessary to establish peace and harmony and to enable humanity to thrive and prosper in the creation gifted to it. The twists and turns of empire and temple may rotate in the opposite directions to the movement of the Spirit of the living God in the person of Jesus Christ. The scapegoating in Jesus' crucifixion by evil vindictiveness exposed not only the sinister agenda of the religious and political powers but their ultimate judgement. In dismantling their edifices Jesus established a new Temple, a new safe-place, a living sanctuary where humanity can be released from the strains and struggles of hierarchical tyranny (1 Corinthians

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3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesian 2:1–22; Colossians 1:13–23; 1 Peter 2:4ff; Revelation 21:22). Abraham's faith family share in these blessings. They share them freely as a new community of faith:

Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:34–36; cf. Matthew 3:9, 8:11; Luke 21:55–73; Acts 3:13ff, 7:2ff; Romans 4:9ff; Galatians 3:6ff).

The victory of God occurs in the middle of ineffective human activity. The defeat of the serpent identified in Revelation 12 is by a human person. God with us defeats evil, not God over or above us or apart from us. The Word became flesh. An original eyewitness of Jesus Christ declared that

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 – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us (1 John 1:1–3).

The writer of Hebrews joins this testimony with praise and thanksgiving. The Hebrew witness from before the time of Christ is redefined and restated in the person and ministry of Jesus. He reflects God's glory as the imprint of God's being, and 'sustains all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:1–3). His cosmic activity is centred in his crucified death. As priest and sacrifice sin is purified, victory is declared and the family of God is given new decency and dignity. Christ's 'atoning sacrifice' is not said to be made to appease an angry deity or to account to an evil tyranny, but is described as tasting death for all humanity as a humble servant. By this sharing in human 'flesh and blood' he shows his trust in 'one Father' who sanctifies those among whom he stands (Hebrews 1:3, 2:1–14). The victory and reign of God are built on and by God's grace and mercy. The divine disposition towards defiant humanity is both its judgement and liberation (Hebrews 4:1–16).

Next time

In what ways do the death and resurrection of Jesus announce the renewal of humanity and creation? In what ways does belonging to Christ prepare us for life beyond death and in the world to come?

God renews his creation

Introduction

The hideous power of sin and evil is broken, their foul pollution washed away and their awful penalty borne. We live by faith knowing that the pain and presence of sin and evil will not be with us beyond death in the renewed creation God has promised.

A new day has dawned, a new era has begun. At every point sin, evil and death seem to win, but faith believes 'the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). God is about a renewed heavens and earth where everything is good, righteous, holy, loving and true.

Discovery

Identify and explore New Testament passages that declare God's reconciliation and unification in Christ. Notice the centrality and cruciality of the death and resurrection of Jesus in these passages.

God fulfils his plans and achieves his purposes. He defeats human enmity and wickedness and breaks the power of demonic evil and its scheming maliciousness. Look at ways in which New Testament writers express this divine accomplishment and victory. What is said about God as Father, Son and Spirit in these passages?

God recreates all things. His new creation is renewed forever. Consider the ways the New Testament writers see this as impacting on the early believers as they faced persecution and uncertainty.

Reflection

The impact of the enmity and domination described from the early chapters of Genesis is not defeated by divine hostility and coercion, but by God's grace and mercy in Christ. Paul's testimony to the Philippian Christians centred on the word *therefore*. Because of Jesus' faithful obedience to death, God exalted him to a place not habitable by those who count themselves better than other people. The politically powerful and the religiously and philosophically wise of this world are shamed into humility before the majesty of one who has given himself in love for the world (Philippians 2:1ff; Galatians 2:20; Romans 5:1ff; Ephesians 2:4ff; 1 John 4:9ff). The ultimate Exodus hinted at in Revelation 1:5 releases humanity from the tyranny of sin into being 'a kingdom, priests serving [Jesus'] God and Father' in a creation liberated from the bondage and decay Paul described in Romans 8:18ff.

The theme of victory evident in Philippians 2:5ff, Romans 8:31ff and 1 Corinthians 15:20ff correlates with the outpouring and ministry of the Holy Spirit and the reconciling action of Christ through his death. The creating of a new

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humanity as God's family is the result and reality effected by the victory of God through the work and power of the Holy Spirit. The life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus do not simply provide an example for Christians to try to emulate, they identify the Body of Christ in which we are now called to live and move and have our being. Anyone in Christ participates in this new creation. This is our present habitat and our promised future. Paul's thesis in Galatians is that barriers of class, religious group, ethnicity and gender are dismantled:

in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26–28).

His logic is not that these hierarchical divisions are dissolved *only for conversion*, but that they disappear as power constructs and operational constraints *in Christ*. His point to Peter at Antioch was not only about *entry* into the household of God, but *living* in it. The old indeed has passed away and the new has come! The life of the flesh has given way to the abundance of the Spirit. True freedom has arrived and God, far from being mocked, is worshipped and glorified (Galatians 5 and 6):

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

The gospel of the cross

Meditations on Jesus' death as told by the different Gospel narratives

The seven sayings or words of Jesus from the cross are reflected on using the context provided by each of the Gospel writers. More time is spent on the three words from John's Gospel, with attention to passages indicating the death of Christ, including the upper room discourse. An initial perspective is provided by looking at two significant atonement passages in Paul's epistles, with the theme of atoning sacrifice concluding the series.

Even death on a cross

Introduction

In Philippians 2:1–11 and Ephesians 5:14b–33 Paul outlines something of his understanding of the inseparability of the cross of Christ to everyday family and community life. For Paul, the cross is not a remote reality, but a living revelation bringing hope and encouragement.

Paul's thoughts in Philippians 2:1–11 progress from his initial reference to Christ and the Spirit, and, I suggest, to the Father,⁹ to a statement about the humanity of Christ Jesus, and then to his death and exaltation.

Paul's words to the Ephesian church in 5:14b–33 are often read through lenses including those of Christian worship and gender roles. While these concerns need careful consideration, Paul is first wanting his readers to awaken and 'Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you' (Ephesians 5:14). Paul, having set the context by mentioning God the Father, Christ Jesus as Lord, the Holy Spirit, and our relationship with them, then talks about Jesus' humanity and his death on the cross.

Discovery

In what ways does Philippians 2:1–11 enrich our understanding of God as Father, Son and Spirit, with Jesus as God's Son, and of his death, resurrection and ascension? What does it mean to bend the knee, to humble our hearts and to devote our minds to glorify God the Father in the Holy Spirit by confessing the sovereign majesty of Messiah Jesus?

In what ways does Messianic light bring wise and productive living in the 'will of the Lord', the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and with hearts 'giving thanks to God the Father ... in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 5:17–20)? Compare the pattern in this passage to that in Philippians 2.

Reflection

Philippians 2:1–11 indicates that God highly exalted Jesus for a reason. Jesus had achieved something no other person could or would ever do. From one perspective, he was not humiliated, as his gracious humility outweighed the hideous hostility, degradation and disgrace that was directed at him. His obedience was not merely notional or behavioural, but was an expression of his love for God and humanity, of his 'sharing in the Spirit', and of his 'compassion and sympathy'. Uniquely among all people, he was 'in full accord and of one mind' with God the Father

⁹ 'any consolation from love' may tacitly refer to the Father's love for Christ and us, and so of Christ's love for us. The fruit of the Spirit includes love (Galatians 5:22).

and the Holy Spirit. He looked to the interests of those around him who sought to humiliate him by killing him in this violent and vicious manner.¹⁰

The references in Philippians 2 to humility, and the welfare of other people, correlate with a call for mutual subjection in Ephesians 5. Paul devotes few words to wives about subjection knowing that their roles in his day were heavily subordinated. What Paul says has implications for those with hierarchical power. He makes, therefore, a detailed call for husbands to learn from Christ's love for his church, contradicting cultural patterns of domination and non-participatory headship. Love, as we have seen in Philippians 2, looks to the interests of others, and involves a submissive spirit. True love and submission are mutual and interpersonal, patterned after Christ and the church. By Christ's death, the household of God is made holy, clean and glorious. Only Christ is Saviour, and only he is Lord.¹¹ We are to nourish and care for our own welfare, and the welfare of others, with the same mind-set and spirit as Philippians 2:1ff, in relationship with the God revealed in these passages.

For Paul, the life of the household of God, as worshipping communities and families, centres on the work of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. The cross of Christ is good news because of God's work with us personally and together. The cross of Christ confronts us about ways we too easily profile ourselves using power, prestige, prominence and patronage. Leaving exaltation to God the Father, and living without servility and obsequiousness, but learning humility from Christ by the Spirit, is a daily calling best learned in patient and generous service to humanity as God leads us.

Next time

Luke's description of the death of Christ includes three statements by Jesus from the Cross. What insights into God as Father does Luke record that help us understand these sayings from the Cross?

¹⁰ There are many hints of Psalms 2 and 110 in this passage.

¹¹ There is no other mediator between God and any human person than Jesus Christ, including between wives and God, children and God, and workers and God (cf. 1 Timothy 2:3–6).

Knowing, forgiving, and trusting

Introduction

Luke's account includes three of Jesus' statements from the cross, with the first and last sayings addressed to God as Father. Jesus' prayers to his Father, including his asking for his accusers to be forgiven, are reminders of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:2ff).

There have been and still are many debates about God's fatherhood. Patriarchal views may lead to women being marginalised and excluded, while other perspectives may also create misunderstandings about fatherhood and parenting. God's fatherhood is sometimes seen as either harsh and judgemental, or alternatively, as mindlessly embracing and accommodating. The way Jesus' relationship with his Father is interpreted impacts on views about the Trinity, the incarnation and the atonement. These perceptions of God as Father affect the way we understand human relationships, and the way we think about human relationships impacts on our views of God.

Luke invites us into a revelation of God as an eternal Father whose Son seeks him in the Temple (2:49), who is pleased with his Son (3:22, 9:35), about whom we are not to be ashamed (9:18–27), who trusts his Son to reveal him (10:17–23), as the heavenly Father to whom we are to pray (11:1–4), who gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask him (11:5–13), who provides for humanity and gives the kingdom of God (12:22–39), and who seeks prodigals and sinners (15:11–31, 16:19–30).

Discovery

With this background regarding God's Fatherhood, what can we learn about the forgiveness Jesus asked for, the promise he made to the thief about Paradise, and the trust he showed in his Father as he died?

Reflection

Forgiveness relates to how we see our families, our community and work environments, and our church participation. It is a forensic term that affects what we think about and do with assigned guilt and blame. It involves revoking retaliatory punishment and annulling punitive judgement rather than deleting memory and embracing ignorance. God remembers sins no more, and love is not resentful,¹² yet the Bible records evil done by forgiven people. The biblical focus is on renewal and restoration, not amelioration and amnesia.

¹² e.g. Hebrews 8:12, 10:17. 1 Corinthians 13:5 NRSV says love 'is not irritable or resentful', while the NIV states that 'love keeps no record of wrongs'.

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Forgiveness is a personal prerogative, while reconciliation involves two parties. Forgiveness connects with, but is not conviction, confession, repentance or restitution. True peace is realised as these factors are expressed together. The crucified Jesus prays for his Father to forgive those present at his death, knowing that forgiveness is central to God's gracious and merciful plan to bring peace to this troubled world.

The ignorance of which Jesus spoke did not minimise the actions of his opponents; it clarified them (cf. Acts 2:22, 23). Jesus asked his Father to forgive those around him even as they insisted on his death. He was not asking a reluctant Father to forgive them, nor did he commit himself to a reticent Father as he died. The hostility he experienced was not from his Father, but from humanity and the powers of evil. Jesus was and is one with his Father, his Father is eternally one with his beloved Son, and it was by the Holy Spirit that Jesus committed his spirit when he was dying. God's forgiveness is now not something for which we are required to grovel. Nor are God's gifts automatic, inconsequential and mundane.

Paradise couldn't come quickly enough for the thief who recognised the truth of Jesus' prayer, and the identity of the one next to him. Jesus' words to him are a reminder that while forgiveness does not erase the presence of our failures in this life, it deals with their penalty, and brings refreshment, cleansing, purification, justification and holiness. The word to the thief is a reminder that Jesus is similarly with us, and that we are not alone. God's plan is to take us from the Place of the Skull and to a Paradise where, unlike the original Eden, there will be no serpentine seduction or accusation.

Luke wants his readers to know 'all that the prophets have declared' (Luke 24:25). He writes of Mary, Zechariah, the angels, Simeon and Anna. He tells us Jesus commenced his ministry by speaking of the Spirit of the Lord releasing captives and healing people. We can cry out 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do', and hope for Paradise as we trust ourselves to the Father by whose initiative all sins are forgiven. It is there, at the cross, that the 'dawn from on high' breaks upon us bringing light to our darkness and guiding 'our feet into the way of peace' (Luke 1:79, 80).

Next time

In what ways does Luke's portrayal of the death of Jesus help us understand Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the cross?

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Abandoned, but not alone

Introduction

Matthew and Mark provide a different perspective to Luke on the death of Jesus. Jesus is not described as speaking to his Father or to the criminal next to him. He is said to be apart from other people, mocked as a Jewish king, and insulted for being the Son of God. His isolation is emphasised by mentioning his cry of dereliction; a cry which those nearby misunderstood. Their description relents from this severity to focus on the women who looked ‘on from a distance’, on the centurion who recognised Jesus as God’s Son, and on Joseph of Arimathea, who received permission to place Jesus’ body in his own tomb (Matthew 27:54–61; Mark 15:39–47).

As he suffered, Jesus’ gripping cry was not a scream (Matthew 27:33–49; Mark 15:22–41). It was a declaration of his plight, and a description of the relational dislocation from God and humanity that bearing sin and evil involved. He quoted from Psalm 22:1 (cf. Isaiah 52:13–53:12), and so also pointed to hope beyond his imminent death (Psalm 22:21b–31).

Discovery

Matthew and Mark include a range of statements preparing their readers for the tragedy overtaking Jesus. Identify ways in which these passages help provide understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection:

- Matthew’s comment on Jesus’ healings (Matthew 8:14–17, cf. 1:21).
- Jesus’ reference to the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38–42, 16:1–4).
- Both writers’ mention of the centurion’s affirmation about Jesus being God’s Son (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39).
- Mark’s record of Jesus’ three predictions of his death (Mark 8:31–9:1, 9:30–32, 10:32–34).
- Both writers’ descriptions of the Last Supper and the events prior to Pilate’s verdict (Matthew 26:1–27:25; Mark 14:1–15:15).
- Jesus’ reference to Zechariah’s prophecy and Peter’s declaration that he would remain faithful (Matthew 26:31–35; Mark 14:26–31).

Reflection

Psalm 22, from which Jesus was quoting, continues

I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. ... To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. ... Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. ... But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly

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to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion! (Psalm 22:2–21; cf. Jonah 2:2).

David adds ‘... you have rescued me’ before declaring that he will ‘tell of your name ...; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you’ (Psalm 22:21, 22, cf. Psalms 18, 30, 34, 40, 42–43, 99, 107).

Jesus’ abandonment by those at his trial and death highlights the divine silence that contrasts with the voice at his baptism and transfiguration (Matthew 3:1–17, 17:1–13; Mark 1:1–11, 9:2–8; cf. Matthew 11:25–30). God’s silence during Jesus’ desolation anticipates the answer God gives in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension (Matthew 28; Mark 16:1–8a).

It might be argued that one way Matthew’s Gospel is differentiated from Mark’s Gospel is in the way Matthew bookends his narrative by referring to God’s presence rather than his absence (Matthew 1:23, 28:20). Perhaps Matthew wants his readers to remember that there is divine comfort even in the centre of the most horrible evil and torment.

God’s judgements do not divide the Trinity. The Son is not set against his Father, nor the Father against his Son. Nor is one divine attribute pitted against another, as if God’s love, truth, righteousness, holiness and goodness impact on us in conflicting ways. God is one God, who hears the cries of forlorn and failed humanity *in* the depths of Jesus’ perfect humanity. In the mystery of God, Jesus does not cease to be Immanuel, God with us, as he bears the bewildering anguish assigned to him in his crucifixion. Indeed, he does not cease to be Immanuel as risen and ascended Lord, but, as Matthew records, he declares that he will be with humanity ‘to the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20). It is this timeless reality into which the nations are invited to be immersed. It is for this purpose that ‘all authority’ has been given to him (Matthew 28:18–20).

Next time

John mentions three statements of Jesus from the cross. In what ways are we invited to consider how these sayings provide further insights into Jesus’ death?

Family, together

Introduction

In his first three sayings on the cross, Jesus was concerned for those near him. He had prayed for his crucifiers to be forgiven, and assured the criminal next to him of a place in Paradise. John records that he spoke to ‘his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing by her’ (John 19:26). Roman soldiers, criminals and Galilean working families were not the most important members of Jerusalem society!

This is the first of three sayings from the cross in John’s Gospel (John 19:26–30). Jesus referred to God as Father in the statements in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 23:34, 46). In this word, he links Mary and John by terms depicting family relationships. Jesus comforts his friends with words that suggest his death was relevant to those experiencing difficulties with singleness, marriage and family life (cf. Psalm 68:1–6).

Discovery

At a wedding in Cana, Jesus told his mother, whom he called ‘Woman’ at that time as well, that his ‘hour’ had not yet arrived (John 2:1–5, cf. 7:30, 8:20, 12:23, 27). In calling John her son, and naming Mary as John’s mother, his thoughts were not on himself.¹³ Consider how this saying of Jesus reveals something of his true love for everyone (cf. John 13:1, 16:21, 17:1).

In what ways might this saying from the cross help us understand Jesus’ dialogue with the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:21–26), and the woman who heard Jesus’ word to not sin anymore, and to her accusers (John 8:1–11)?

Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea put Jesus in Joseph’s tomb, while Mary Magdalene goes there in the early morning of Jesus’ resurrection (John 20:1–18). Other women had been near his cross (John 19:25). What can we learn from these descriptions of the impact of Jesus on these people?¹⁴

Just as Jesus’ first and last words speak of God as Father, so this one helps unveil the wonderful mystery of God’s family (cf. Caiaphas’ prophecy John 11:45–53), and his intention to bring his people together. Jesus had prayed to his Father with this purpose in mind. Look for references about this in John 13 to 17 (see also John 5:19–47, 6:22–71, 8:12–59).

¹³ Jesus is not denigrating Mary by calling her woman, but honouring her as the divine plan of salvation is being realised in his crucifixion (cf. Genesis 3:14, 15). I am assuming that the disciple who was standing with Mary was John.

¹⁴ The other Gospels add detail about the women who were present at his death, who attended his burial, and who went back on resurrection morning (Matthew 27:55–61, 28:1–10; Mark 15:40–47, 16:1–11; Luke 23:49–56, 24:1–12, 24).

In what ways does John 1:10–18 set the context for this saying from the cross? Explore ways in which this connects with Jesus' comparison of himself to Abraham, and God's covenant with Abraham (John 8:31–59; cf. Genesis 12:1ff)?

Reflection

In the Upper Room, Jesus talked of there being many dwelling places in his Father's house, and of his going to prepare 'a place' for them (John 14:1–3; note the welcome Jesus received and the welcome offered in John 1:10–18). He declared that he 'would not leave them orphaned' but would be the way to the Father, and the truth and the life of the Father (John 14:6, 18). He told them that they would share in his and his Father's love and life when the Spirit came, and so be filled with joy. As he hung crucified, he applied his message to the immediate needs of his mother and his disciple standing with her. In focusing them on each other, he was also highlighting what he was doing. There can be no family, now or in eternity, without the grace of his cross. He was not saving them from seeing his suffering, but was releasing them through his suffering into family life in a new community. He was reminding them of the salvation he had in mind, and so of the freedom from sin necessary for living in authentic families. His was – and is – a word of hope and anticipation, as well as of comfort. He is, indeed and in deed, the Lamb who removes the world's sin (John 1:29–36).

Jesus' words from the cross show his relationship with his Father and the Spirit. The action of his cross liberates us to live in the family of God, and share in those relationships. The new Eden is populated with the desolate whom God has given a home to live in. God's adoption of us is his initiative. It is by his love, grace, mercy and truth that we receive eternal life (John 1:14–18, cf. John 3:13–36).

Next time

In what ways does Jesus' thirst indicate a movement in the narrative from his concern for others to the urgency of his immediate well-being and the consequences on him personally of his mission?

Living water

Introduction

Those watching Jesus' crucifixion must have wondered whether his spirit was being crushed by his ordeal. His intense cry indicates his longing for a resurgent flow of the Spirit, of the fullness of God which was God's gift to him (cf. John 3:34–36, 14:10, 11). His thirst was more than physical thirst (cf. Psalms 22:12–18, 69:1–4, 13–21; Matthew 27:45–49; Mark 15:33–36). He was crying out to God for the rich communion he knew before his cry of desolation and abandonment (cf. Psalm 84). In identifying himself with sinful humanity, Jesus, without sinning, knew the horror of God's judgement on evil, wickedness and sin.

Discovery

Consider Jesus' thirst using the statements in John 1:29–36 about Jesus as the Lamb of God who removes the world's sin, and the Holy Spirit remaining on him, declaring him as Son of God and Spirit baptizer.

In what ways does Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit help us understand his cry of thirst from the cross (John 3:1ff)?

In what ways did Jesus identify with the thirst of the woman at the well? What did he mean, and what did it mean for him when he said that she need never thirst again (John 4:1–42)?

In John 6:22–65, especially 6:35, Jesus spoke about being the bread of life and said those who believed would 'never be thirsty' (cf. John 6:53, 60–65). In what ways does his cry from the cross explain this passage, and what insights does this passage provide about his dying thirst?

On the last day of his final festival of Tabernacles, Jesus 'cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me"' (John 7:37–39; cf. Jeremiah 2:12, 13; Psalms 36, 42, 46, 63, 65, 84, 87; Proverbs 4:23; Job 34:14, 15). On the cross, Jesus accepted some cheap sour wine to quench his thirst 'knowing that all was now completed' (cf. Psalm 22:14, 15). In what ways do these passages work together to help us understand these two events?

Do you see any connections between Jesus' vinedresser illustration in John 15:1–13 and Jesus' thirst on the cross (cf. John 16:31–33)?

In what ways can Jesus' declaration of his thirst be seen to be answered in John 20:19–23?

Reflection

The Father is one with his Son in loving the world and saving those who believe (John 3:14–21). In Jesus' suffering on the cross, and in his words from the cross, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit expose the gulf between God and sinful humanity.

Living in Love and Freedom

The tyranny of evil powers and defiant humanity are defeated by the incarnate Son of the Father as the true man of the Spirit (John 1:1ff, 3:31ff).

The Father's promise is fulfilled in and through his Son (John 14:15ff, 16:7ff, 20:19ff; cf. John 3:27–30), with Jesus given the Spirit 'without measure' (John 3:31–36, cf. 12:27–43). Jesus died having completed all that was necessary for his future Messianic reign (John 19:28–30). The Good Shepherd had cared for, and so continues to care for, his sheep (cf. John 10:1–18).

According to Jesus, the 'living Father' and the Son have life in themselves (John 5:26, 6:57). Jesus urged his hearers to believe him when he declared that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10; cf. John 1:4; 1 John 1:2). The life Jesus offered meant laying down his life for his friends (John 10:1–30, 15:13; 1 John 3:16; see also John 5:21–40 and 6:33–68; cf. Revelation 1:12–18).

Given John's testimony concerning God as the living God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' cry of thirst on the cross confirms John the Baptist's declaration about him (John 1:29–36).¹⁵

Next time

Jesus' last cry from the cross in John's Gospel is one of accomplishment. In what ways are we to understand that *He* is not finished, even though his death appeared to indicate a final doomed and disastrous demise?

¹⁵ 'Our Lord claimed that these promises concerning the Spirit were to be fulfilled in Him. He claimed the fulfilment of prophecy in the gift of the Spirit to Him in Jordan, and He claimed it also in the gift of the Spirit to the world. ... There are seven fundamental statements about the Spirit in the promise of the Son. (1) That the self-same Spirit that had been given to the Son would be given to them. (2) That He would be to them all that He had been to Him. (3) That He would be to them all that the Son had been to them and more. (4) That He would be in them as the Son had been with them. (5) That they would gain in Him more than they would lose in the departure of Christ. (6) That He would be the Paraclete, or Other Self of the Christ, and through His indwelling the Christ would live in them. (7) That His Mission was to glorify the Son by taking of the things of Christ and making them available to us'. Samuel Chadwick, *Way to Pentecost, The* (Bungay, Suffolk, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 21–23, commenting on John 7:37–39 and John 14–16.

Finished, forever

Introduction

Jesus assures us through this saying that there is a plan, a purpose, in all that happened to him (John 19:28–30). It was not fate or chance, nor was it failure and defeat. On the contrary, a goal had been reached, a destination arrived at, and a purpose realised.

Jesus had prayed for the forgiveness of his accusers and murderers, he had promised companionship in Paradise to a criminal, and had provided familial context for his mother and his close friend. When he ‘knew that all was finished’, he called for the refreshment of God’s presence before declaring that he had reached his goal. From then on, humanity is confronted by his accomplishment, and this confrontation is firstly about the death of death in the death of Jesus (John 8:51).

Discovery

Consider this word from the cross using the themes of light and darkness in John’s Gospel (e.g. John 1:4–7, 3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:35, 46).

Explore references to the world in John’s Gospel for insights into Jesus’ declaration that ‘It is finished’ (John 1:9–29 3:16–19, 4:42, 6:14, 33, 51, 8:12–26, 9:39, 12:19–31, 46, 47, 14:17–31, 15:18, 19, 16:8–11, 28–33, 17:5–25, 18:36, 37).

What did it mean for Jesus to be ‘lifted up’ (John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32–34)?

Identify ways Jesus’ accomplishment on the cross can be linked with the Father’s love for his Son (John 3:35, 5:20 10:17, 18, 15:9, 10)?

In what ways does Jesus’ discussion about freedom and truth explain this declaration on the cross (John 8:21–59)?

Explore links between Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus trusting his Father to raise him from death (John 5:19–29, 11:1–44).

In what ways had judgement come, driving this world’s ruler out, and destroying his evil works and empire (John 12:27–33)?

What insights into the things that Jesus finished on the cross are explained in John 14:30, 31?

What does it mean that he was doing the works his Father gave him to do? What were these works, and in what ways do they relate to this last declaration from the cross in John’s Gospel (John 4:34, 5:17–36, 6:27–30, 9:3, 10:25–37, 14:10–12, 15:24, 17:4)?

Consider the relationship between this announcement and Jesus’ earlier prayer in John 17?

Reflection

Jesus did not proclaim that he was finished nor that he had finished, but that 'It is finished'. He did not complete *this* task in the grave, or when resurrected or ascended, but *on the cross*. His declaration indicated he had not only completed all that God had given him to do up to and at that time, but that he had finished it how, where and when God had planned for it to be done (John 4:34, 5:36, 13:3, 17:4, also 2:4, 7:6–8, 12:23–32). All that he would achieve from this moment onwards would flow from this accomplishment (John 20:19–30, 21:15–19).

Jesus saw his death as anything but a complete disaster. He believed his death was his Father's will, and so, by the Spirit, it was also his own will (John 8:21–30, 10:11–18, cf. 3:33–36). Yet the conflict had understandably weighed heavily on him as he knew of his coming 'hour' of suffering (John 2:4, 4:21–23, 5:25–28, 7:30, 8:20, 12:27–33, 13:1ff). He had come from the Father for a purpose (John 1:1–18, 5:43, 6:42, 8:42, 12:27), and would return to him to fulfil a new mandate (John 14:12, 28, 16:10, 17, 17:11, 20:17). As the narrative in John's Gospel proceeds there is a change in emphasis from that of Jesus coming from the Father to him returning to the Father (John 8:12–20, 13:1–3, 16:28).

In the discourse in John 14 to 16, he does not see himself returning to his Father to be alone. Jesus had told his disciples that they 'cannot follow me now; but ... will follow afterward' (John 13:36, 37, 16:32, cf. 6:37, 44, 65, 14:1–7, 23, 17:20–24, 20:17). He promises them the Advocate 'whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf' (John 15:26). The joy that will come at that time will be forever. In all their troubles and doubts they could 'take courage; I have conquered the world' (John 16:28, cf. 14:12, 28).

Prior to this discourse, Jesus had mentioned that his soul was troubled (John 12:27–43), and Isaiah 6 and 53 are quoted to indicate that Jesus' victory would come through great suffering and death. The promises of Christ during his ministry are made certain in his death and resurrection. Although those who follow him will find many parallels with his suffering (John 12:23–26), they can expect to receive the same inner peace that the Father had given him. They can live under their Lord's authority, in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and with the blessings of true forgiveness (John 20:17–31). These treasures are available for everyone; for the world that God loved so much that he gave his own Son to be impaled as a serpent in the wilderness (John 3:13–16).

The Gospel ends as it began. In and through all that Jesus suffered, he, the incarnate Word, was still with his Father, and his Father was still with him. The Holy Spirit had been breathed on his disciples, a new era of forgiveness and peace had commenced, and a new family-community had been created! In the cross of Jesus, God declares both his triumph over triumphalism, and the death of death.

Living in Love and Freedom

The new life God gives is eternal in depth and time, and is available for the whole world.

Next time

In what ways does the New Testament describe Jesus' death? His death as an atoning sacrifice takes us to the heart of God's personal response in mercy and grace to human defiance and despair. It provides insights into who God reveals himself to be in the cross of Christ.

Atoning sacrifice

Introduction

There is much that can be said about what Jesus did on the cross. Studying reconciliation, redemption, justification, victory, restoration, atoning sacrifice, and other biblical terms opens rich truths about God's work in Christ, Christ's lordship over all creation, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Understanding grace, mercy and peace in terms of God's holiness, goodness, truth, righteousness and love reveals more of who Jesus is and what he accomplished by his death and resurrection.

God's response to depravity, deceit and evil is always consistent with his own character and triune person. He is not an accusing deity from whose hostile judgements an affable Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit, saves us. Revelation 12:1–17 makes it clear who it is that accuses and deceives, and it is not God or his Messiah-Lamb!¹⁶

Habakkuk understood that God was too pure to look on evil *without judging it* (Habakkuk 1:1–17).¹⁷ The prophet notes that proud people fail at God's 'appointed time' while righteous people live by faith, even when things do not work out well (Habakkuk 2:1–4, 3:16–19; cf. Romans 1:16ff). Habakkuk prays 'In our own time revive [your work]; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy' (Habakkuk 3:1, 2). His prayer is consistent with the covenant LORD's purpose and character (cf. Exodus 34:5ff). God's actions are restorative and not malicious. They are awesome in scope and reveal his majestic holiness. They come from the LORD who 'is in his temple' and they fill the earth 'with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14, 20).

The words used for *atoning sacrifice*, sometimes translated *expiation* or *propitiation*, are reframed by New Testament writers from other cultural contexts and from

¹⁶ 'It is quite true that there is a way of preaching the Cross that approaches blasphemy. It pits the Son against the Father, and represents God as a reluctant Shylock who yields only when the utmost claim has been met. There was no antagonism between the Father and the Son. ... God was in Christ in all the suffering of redemption. The Son was the gift of the Father's love. The love of God is commended, not conceded, in the death of Christ. Herein was the love of God manifested in us, not procured for us, that God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ... The Cross is the supreme manifestation of divine love, but it is that because it was for our sins He died. Love sums up all, for God is love, but in love is law. Love and holiness are not at variance, any more than Father and Son could ever be in antagonism, but love is not complacency. ... God is love, and God is fire. The death of Christ is set forth by God to be a propitiation through faith, by His blood, to show His righteousness. God could not connive at sin.' *Gospel of the Cross, The* (Torquay, UK: Epworth Press, 1935), 9, 10.

¹⁷ Habakkuk is not suggesting God turns away from evil. Rather, he is concerned about what God's focus on Israel's evil, and that of other nations, would mean.

their Hebrew Bible to emphasise divinely motivated mercy rather than human-initiated mollification.¹⁸

Discovery

Develop an outline of the ways New Testament writers use the term atoning sacrifice by examining the context in which the term is used:

Jesus, God's righteous Son, advocates with the Father, as the 'atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:1, 2).

There is no fear of punishment in God's love because God 'sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:7–21).

Jesus destroyed 'the one who has the power of death' and frees 'those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death'. He does this by becoming '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 2:14–18, cf. 4:11–16).

Romans 3:19–26 describes Christ's 'sacrifice of atonement' in terms of a righteousness that justifies by faith as a freely donated gift. God put Jesus forward as 'a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed'.

The mercy that the tax gatherer asked for in Luke 18:9–14 uses the same terminology. Jesus' commentary about the proud Pharisee and the tax gatherer is a reminder of Habakkuk 2:4.

Reflection

These passages indicate something of the way God deals with sin, removes fear, overcomes the tyranny of evil and its resulting slavery, and ends the power of death. God acts in righteousness and love. His justification is a gift of mercy to be freely received and lived in by faith.

The atoning sacrifice provided by Christ is not a harsh, brutal amelioration of a hostile, furious deity of whom we should be terrified because of his intemperate anger. These passages explore ways in which God's love, holiness, truth, righteousness and goodness work to restore people by his mercy and grace, and lead us to true worship of the living, covenant God.

The New Testament writers used the idea of atoning sacrifice not to describe Jesus placating his Father, nor did they think in terms of paying a ransom to a capricious

¹⁸ *Atoning sacrifice* in NRSV and NIV is *propitiation* in ESV, NKJV and NASB and *expiation* in RSV.

devil. God's wrath is the personal action of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit against evil, and not a form of intra-Trinitarian dispute or payment. God never endorses sin and evil. God sees evil as horrible and toxic, and acts to eliminate it by grace and mercy. The new creation is what it is because God does not use the Devil's methods (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:4; Philippians 2:5–11).

The cross is not a self-imposed internal divine severity seeking to pay for a faulty creation, but a reaching out from and by divine transcendence into created time and space to engage restoratively with his world in and through the humanity of Jesus. In Jesus' death on the cross, sin and evil are judged. The irrationality and unreasonableness of evil and wickedness are exposed. By the death of Christ humanity is liberated from eternal shame. No final word of derision and ridicule over humanity's inability to save itself is now permissible (cf. Ephesians 1–3).

The cross of Christ involves more than the removal of sin or the cancellation of guilt. To ignore the idea that God is personally offended by our sin and evil makes the atonement into a mechanical and impersonal ritual. There is nothing simply tokenistic or merely symbolic about Jesus' crucifixion. At the cross, the triune God acted in unity, abandoning God's own self in Christ to the darkest evil humanity can ever know, and so changed humanity's history and destiny forever. A new heaven and a new earth awaits. Meanwhile this creation aches for the unveiling and glorifying of God's restored family. In the interim, God works for the welfare of 'those who love God, who are called according to his purpose'. He gives us the 'first fruits of the Spirit' who 'helps us in our weakness', and who 'intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Romans 8:23–28). In being 'more than conquerors', inseparable from 'the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord', we are not removed from hardship and struggle, but provided with divine presence and assurance in them (Romans 8:31–38; 2 Corinthians 4:8–5:11).¹⁹

¹⁹ A range of helpful further reading is included in the *Reading lists* at the end of this book. What is written elsewhere in this book may also assist readers in their understanding of the cross of Christ.

Further thoughts

As I have included two quotes from Samuel Chadwick, and few other references, someone might ask me why I chose him from many other writers, when there are aspects of his thinking which I understand from different perspectives. In the late 1970s I noticed two books by Chadwick on one of my mother's bookshelves; both published in 1935. One book has an inscription to her 'with best wishes from New Zealand Xmas 1936', with no indication of the giver's identity! I remain grateful for this gift to her from whoever, and for my unplanned reading of these books many years ago.

I found chapter 3 of *The Way to Pentecost* to be something of a circuit breaker. Chadwick's thoughtful and easily understood pastoral comments provided me with a welcome summary of some wonderful truths. As a leader of an evangelical student group in the early 1970s I had attempted to ease tensions between Pentecostal and anti-Pentecostal viewpoints. I was helped by the main theology lecturers accessed by the group at that time: Vic. Pfitzner and Geoffrey Bingham. Thomas Smail later came to my aid through his book, *Reflected Glory*.²⁰ These theologians pointed out that the Gospel writers linked the ministry of the Holy Spirit with the presence of the reign of God and the reconciliation enabled by the forgiveness of sins.

The second book by Samuel Chadwick in my mother's collection was *The Gospel of the Cross*. I found the first chapter particularly rich. The quote I have chosen encapsulates a portion of Chadwick's thinking. Adam J. Johnson's *Atonement – A Guide for the Perplexed* provides a helpful and more detailed examination of issues relating to Trinitarian thinking and divine attributes.²¹

These issues are personally important because, for me, the wrath of God is not God being harsh and vindictive towards his Son, or anyone. Nor is his wrath some internal act of self-imposed severity within God himself. God's wrath does not mean that once God is done with judgement, he then comes in grace and mercy to create fruitfulness. It also does not mean that if his grace and mercy are rejected that God then acts apart from them in wrath-filled judgement.

God is neither an accuser nor an ameliorator. The cross of Christ demonstrates God's revulsion at these types of potency and impotency. It reveals God's determination to bring renewal by affirmation, truth and goodness, and to do so in the places where allegation, treachery and guilt flourish. His wrath is light in darkness, a light so incomprehensible to fallen humanity that we do not comprehend it of ourselves. It is a light that exposes and heals, not a mirror that

²⁰ Thomas A. Smail, *Reflected Glory* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975).

²¹ Adam J. Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

Living in Love and Freedom

replicates the violence and vengeance that it seeks to destroy. The vindication of God is the shining of his light into and out from the darkest, devilish and demonic dungeons which it confronts. Flee from his light we must if we reject it. Flee into it we must, if we are to escape the tyranny of those who would diminish and destroy us by their deceit, dishonour and denial. Flee into it and find the Triune Community whose atoning, sacrificial love removes terror by unique and unison action, always moving together toward us as one God in Christ Jesus, by one Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:1–4:18, especially 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 John 1:1–2:2, 4:1–21). What love is this that calls us God's family, and that leads us to pray 'Our Father' free from patronising patriarchal systems (1 John 3:1–3; Romans 8:14–17; Galatians 4:3–7; Matthew 6:9–15)?

One in Love and Freedom

Living in times of joy and sorrow

What does it mean to live in love, with trust and hope, in times of joy and sorrow? In what ways does the book of Revelation assist in answering this question, and ones like it?

These studies consider the first-person emphasis that underlines the book of Revelation, along with its descriptions of who God is and the ways he acts in human history. John's book is not an attempt to map history, or even to predict historical events. It is a gift to us in which he shares his theology, and expresses something about the way history unfolds. It is an expression of who he understands God to be, and an instruction guide about what it means to live by grace and faith in a troubled world. Yet is more than John's personal communication. It comes to the people of God as the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ by the Spirit of God. It warrants careful study, repeated reading, patient consideration, and everyday application.

The first-person emphasis that underlines the book of Revelation, along with its descriptions of who God is, and the ways he acts throughout history, bring reminders of the understandings that inform the Hebrew Scriptures.²² Yet the writer of Revelation is not retrospective nor is he antiquarian. John cared for people caught in unavoidable and often unsustainable conflict. His motif regarding the reign and rule of God impacts on present reality and future promise in the context of past provision, and provides an important source of inspiration and encouragement for readers in all situations. John's testimony to the testimony of Jesus is that the Jesus of the Apocalypse is none other than the Gospels' and Epistles' Jesus; the Lamb of God who removes the world's evil and establishes an eternal city by his liberating love.

²² Commentaries and Study Bibles provide helpful resources for the numerous Old Testament references that exist in the book of Revelation.

Present and promised victory – 1

A personal gift for today

Revelation 1:1–3

Introduction

John believed his book was authoritative as ‘prophecy’ because it reveals Jesus Christ and what he does (Revelation 1:1–3). He assumed his audience knew that Jesus was a Jew who, having been anointed by the Holy Spirit and affirmed by God as his Father, had been crucified by the Romans. Perhaps he expected them to be familiar with the Gospel and Letters with his name. John wrote of being visited by an angel on the Lord’s day while in exile on Patmos. This record of that revelation was to be read aloud, and to be heard and kept ‘for the time is near’ (Revelation 1:3).

The concerns of the churches to which the book is addressed were comparable to those of the people to whom Jesus preached. There are, for example, common themes in Revelation 1 and the Lord’s prayer. John believed that the recipients of his Revelation needed to know who God is, the best way to live in his world, and what their destiny in and beyond this life looked like.

John’s opening statements are personal. They relate ‘even to all that he saw’, and identify this message with the witness of Jesus Christ to a message he had received from God (Revelation 1:1, 2). The content of John’s Revelation comes from a personal encounter with an angel. His knowledge and reasoning are the fruits of his relationship with God. He is aware of things that ‘must soon take place ... for the time is near’ as he shares with the seven church communities (Revelation 1:1, 3).

Discovery

Examine Revelation 1:1–3 to identify who John saw as involved in the disclosure he shared. Look at the relationships between the participants in this unveiling. Reflect on what can be learned about the way in which Scripture may have been written (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15–17).

Compare these introductory verses and Revelation 22:6–21 with the rationale for John’s Gospel in John 20:30, 31 and John 21:24, 25.

Consider the purpose of John’s first letter in relation to that provided for Revelation (1 John 1:1–3; 2:1–2, 7–8, 12–14, 2:21, 2:26 and 5:13).

In what ways are the blessings nominated in Revelation 1:3 expanded on in the other blessings in Revelation 14:13, 19:9, 20:6 and 22:7, 14?

Reflection

The five-fold process of revelation outlined in the first three verses of chapter one can be summarized as follows. Every stage of the unveiling involves personal communication and relationship, with the goal being the welfare of the communities and the personal responses of those who received the letters.

Who	What
God	Word
Jesus Christ	Testimony
Angel	Message
Servant John	Prophecy
Churches	Hear and keep

This process of revelation provides an extra dimension to the longings expressed in the Gospel and Letters attributed to John. There is only a brief mention about the task of writing the Gospel (John 21:24, 25), with the focus being on readers coming ‘to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing [that they] may have life in his name’ (John 20:30, 31). The Letters are written to strengthen, affirm and encourage those who have accepted the truth shared with them, and to assure them that they are not alone (1 John 1:1–3; 2:1–2, 7–8, 12–14, 2:21, 2:26 and 5:13). The book of Revelation is the third part of a Johannine trilogy in which apocalyptic descriptions reflect on and reinterpret Hebrew wisdom in the light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

The events that happen to us are not to be thought of as random and chaotic, but as occurring within, but not necessarily because of, a divine purpose and intention. There are present and ultimate blessings, even where martyrdom and persecution dominate the landscape, and where evil seems victorious over every effort to be decent and dignified as people of a loving God. Being alert and ready for eternity is understood as the best way to be relevant in the present (Revelation 1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, 14).

Next time

Revelation 1:4–8 provides readers with the way in which the author wanted his book to be read. In what ways can his message of ‘grace and peace from ... the Almighty’ bring encouragement to people struggling with the complexities and uncertainties of life?

Release and restoration

Revelation 1:4–8

Introduction

Revelation 1:4–8 provides a context for understanding the whole book. John identifies who he is writing about, and what it is regarding Jesus which has affected him so deeply (cf. Revelation 1:9). His book does not detail the hostile vengeance of a vindictive and volatile deity, nor does it simply present unrestrained violence and viciousness emanating from malicious spiritual and human evil.

To offer grace and peace from God Almighty to a persecuted church is to be radically subversive. It points to another way, to a different path and to an alternative future to that of the Roman Empire, the Jewish religious system or Hellenic wisdom. It looks for a new and final Exodus led by ‘him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood’ (Revelation 1:5). It trusts the ongoing penetrating presence of the Holy Spirit of God, who acts with Jesus Christ to bring humanity release from wickedness, terror and suffering. It anticipates the restoration of creation and the renewal of human community.

Revelation 1:4 to 8 is a series of embedded statements which are themselves set between references to John and the seven Asian churches:

Grace to you and peace from him
who is and who was and who is to come,
and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,
and from Jesus Christ ... firstborn of the dead ... ruler of the kings of the earth.
To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood ... Amen.
Look! He is coming ... even those who pierced him ... tribes of the earth ...
‘I am the Alpha and Omega,’ says the Lord God,
who is and who was and who is to come,
the Almighty.

Discovery

Reflect on the significance of being greeted with grace and peace in a culture of invasion, persecution, idolatry and powerlessness.

Use this passage to consider who Jesus is described as, and what he is seen to be doing. In what ways does John’s introduction enrich our understanding of our life as the people of God? You may want to compare ideas in these verses such as witness (testimony), faithful, kingdom, priests, and Alpha and Omega with other verses in Revelation.

In these verses John names God, presumably as Father (cf. Revelation 1:6, 2:28, 3:5, 21, 14:1), then identifies the Holy Spirit (cf. Revelation 1:10, 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:1, 6, 13, 22, 5:6, 14:13, 22:17), and finally refers to Jesus Christ. This order differs from some other New Testament references to the Father, Son and Spirit

(e.g. Matthew 28:19; Galatians 4:6; Romans 15:16, 30; 1 Corinthians 6:11, 12:3; 2 Corinthians 13:4; cf. 1 Peter 1:2). In what ways does this listing help emphasise the person and role of Jesus described in the book of Revelation?

Reflection

If John had the Exodus in mind when ascribing glory and honour to Jesus Christ because of his liberating and sacrificial love, then the seals, trumpets and bowls need to be considered in this context. The order of the divine persons – Father, Spirit and Son – is relevant to the visions in chapters 4 and 5. If a tabernacle theme is being hinted at, then the focus on Messiah Jesus as Saviour and sacrifice is understandable, just as is him being a greater Moses. Christ is victorious Lord in being ‘the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth’. (Revelation 1:5). While Psalm 2 terminology is evident here, as in many passages in Revelation, it is not only kings who will weep; on Christ’s ‘account all the tribes of the earth will wail’ (Revelation 1:7).

The reign of God as Father has his people serving him as a kingdom of priests (Revelation 1:6, 5:10 and 20:6). If the description of the ‘one like a Son of Man’ includes royal and priestly garments, then the people of God are engaged in serving with Christ as King and Priest. Their service is not offered to militant earthly empires, nor is it ultimately about defining meaning or determining morality. The fulfilment of ‘the mystery of God’ is central to this book and relates to the victory of God and his people (e.g. Revelation 7:1–17, 12:1–17, 14:1–5, 19:1–22:21). The mystery of evil powers meets its sure doom (Revelation 17:1–14), as indicated by the grace and peace passed on in the greeting in Revelation 1:4–8. The Alpha and Omega ensures that the ‘grace of the Lord Jesus’ is ‘with all the saints’ (Revelation 22:21; Jesus is called the Alpha and Omega in Revelation 21:6 and 22:13).

Next time

The Gospel of John and the Letters attributed to him lack the first-person emphasis evident in the book of Revelation. In what ways does John’s self-identification help us understand the visions that he describes?

Knowing, trusting and living

Revelation 1:1–20

Introduction

Revelation 1:1–8 introduces the reader or listener to the revelations or visions that follow. Three thoughts may be understood as central to the introduction and in what follows. Firstly, those who engage with this book are invited to do so knowing that they are loved by God. They are asked to respond to this love by worshipping God as Father, through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, with thankfulness. As a royal priesthood, they accept his authority and give him glory and praise.

Secondly, readers and listeners are assured that God is trustworthy in times of trouble, trial, torment and tragedy. When joys and triumphs occur, God is the one who is the source of the blessings that come. The book is sent to the seven churches ‘to show his servants what must soon take place ... for the time is near’ (Revelation 1:1, 3).

Thirdly, the uncertainties and difficulties that were being experienced, and would continue to be known, were not the final chapter to be written. Living in hope of God’s promised fullness for his people was to be a present reality with an assured eternal future. Grace and peace is given ‘from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne’. Jesus Christ is ‘the firstborn of the dead’, and ‘is coming with the clouds’ (Revelation 1:4–8).

The vision in Revelation 1:9 to 20 that follows this introduction comes to John when he was ‘*en* ... Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’. He was ‘*en pneumatē* (Spirit) on the Lord’s day’ when he ‘turned to see the voice’ (NASB) that spoke to him.²³ The voice who spoke to him came from ‘one like the Son of Man’ from among ‘seven golden lampstands’. The description suggests that this Son of Man is prophet, priest and king (cf. Revelation 1:3, 6 where prophetic, royal, and priestly service are assigned to the people of God).

Discovery

Reflect on ways in which the greeting in Revelation 1:4–8 and the message not to be afraid in verses 17 and 18 were intended to help those in the seven churches know and trust God, and live in hope regarding his promises.

In the book of Revelation, John uses the expressions ‘I saw’, ‘I heard’, ‘I looked’ and similar terms over 80 times in approximately 400 verses!²⁴ What significance

²³ Michael Wilcock, *Message of Revelation, The (The Bible Speaks Today)* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

²⁴ ‘I saw’, ‘I heard’ and ‘I looked’ or similar occur over 70 times. Other terms include ‘I fell down’, ‘I was in the Spirit’, ‘I, John’, ‘I turned’, ‘I began to weep’, ‘I said to him’, ‘I was about to write’, ‘I went to

might there be in this emphasis, especially when compared to the reticence about author identification evident in John's Gospel and Letters?

Reflect on some of the insights that come from Jesus being described as

like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force (Revelation 1:12–16).

What does John mean by testifying to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 1:2, 5, 9, 3:14, 12:17, 15:5, 17:6, 19:10, 20:4, 22:16, 22:20)?

Reflection

The intensely personal nature of this book is easily lost while trying to understand its apocalyptic language. This personal identification aligns John with who Jesus is and what Jesus does, and aligns Jesus with the Father and the Spirit. Revelation describes what John saw when he was exiled as a witness to what he had previously seen and heard. Revelation mentions people being murdered for their testimonies, making these personal identifications – or tags – a vital part of the life of the churches addressed in this book.

John therefore wrote as one who knew he was loved by God, that God was trustworthy in difficult and perilous circumstances, and that a future lay ahead of him according to God's promises. The readers of and listeners to this book can achieve a better understanding its message from this perspective. The living one who speaks is no stranger to struggle, nor is the one who recorded what he saw and heard. Jesus not only has authority over the churches, he has power over death and destruction as 'the first and the last, and the living one; [for] I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades' (Revelation 1:17). This declaration is fully aligned with the greeting already shared (Revelation 1:4–8).

Next time

Revelation 1:9–20 is a preliminary to the letters to the seven churches. After these letters come trumpets, visions, bowls, statements, and more visions and revelations. These representations are interspersed with visions of heaven and of the final destiny of the people of God – and of those who persist in opposing him. The

the angel', 'I took the little scroll ... I had eaten it', 'I was given', 'I was greatly amazed', 'I warn'. John is told to write or is spoken to around 20 times. He is also addressed as 'you' on many occasions.

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impact on John of receiving these revelations was significant (cf. Revelation 1:17, 19:9, 10, 22:8, 9).

One way of grouping the text of the book of Revelation (excluding the introductory eight verses and final couple of verses) is as follows:²⁵

Present and promised victory – 1		Present and promised victory – 2	
Understanding the present; anticipating the future	Overcoming the world system	Defeating evil spiritual powers	Unveiling eternity; victory here and now
Seven letters 1:9–3:22	Seven trumpets 8:2–11:18	Seven bowls 15:5–16:21	Seven visions 19:11–21:8
Seven seals 4:1–8:1	Seven visions 11:19–15:4	Seven words 17:1–19:10	Seven final revelations 21:9–22:19

What initial thoughts do these sections suggest for you?

²⁵ The eight sections are from Wilcock, *Message of Revelation, The (The Bible Speaks Today)*, 15–20, 110–115. The grouping into four pairs with headings is mine. A summary of the sections is provided in Appendix 1.

Understanding the present; anticipating the future – 1 Revelation 1:9–3:22

Introduction

Jesus Christ is nominated as prophet, priest and king in Revelation 1:9 to 20. He is described as ‘one like the Son of Man’, as someone who gives prophetic testimony, has priestly ministry and offers himself as sacrifice, and who exercises regal authority as ‘the living one’ (cf. Daniel 7:9–14). God Almighty, presumably the Father, is called ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, while Jesus Christ is nominated as ‘the first and the last’ (Revelation 1:4–6, 17). Jesus is described as living forever, having previously died establishing an Exodus from sins for those whom he loves. As victor over death, he gives the seven churches good news as they function as a priestly kingdom serving ‘his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:6).

The seven letters addressed to the seven churches have a clear and uniform structure.²⁶ They begin with a declaration that they come from Jesus as prophet, priest and king.²⁷ These declarations develop the message given by the one whom John heard and turned to see. After an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the churches, and an exhortation to change, the message is given that ‘anyone who has an ear’ should ‘listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Revelation 2:1–3:22). The words spoken and the commands to listen are accompanied by promises to those in each church who remain faithful to the one who gives the revelation recorded in this Apocalypse.²⁸

Discovery

The Discovery sections from now on are under three headings. These headings provide a framework for reflecting on the book of Revelation. They are reminders of many Biblical passages including Psalm 46:10 (‘Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth’.), Psalm 31:1 (‘In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness’. cf. Psalm 38:15, 56:3, 71:1 and 143:8) and Exodus 15:26 (‘I am the Lord who heals you’. cf. Isaiah 44:24–27).²⁹

²⁶ Letters are sent to Ephesus, 2:1–7; Smyrna 2:8–11; Pergamum 2:12–17; Thyatira 2:18–29; Sardis 3:1–6; Philadelphia 3:7–13; and Laodicea 3:14–22. Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger; 2 and 6 are in good shape; 3 to 5 are middling.

²⁷ Wilcock, *Message of Revelation, The (The Bible Speaks Today)*, 37.

²⁸ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation* (London, UK: Tyndale Press, 1969), 58, identifies a seven-fold pattern to the letters, with some exceptions for individual churches: Greeting, title, praise, criticism, warning, exhortation, and promise. This pattern has something of a chiasmic structure, focusing the listener on the issues that each church needs to address – except Smyrna and Philadelphia, where the silence speaks strongly!

²⁹ Some readers may know these passages set to music in Scripture in Song.

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Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Consider the information about the speaker in each of the seven letters in the context of the revelation of Jesus Christ in Revelation 1. Use these insights to identify reasons why people in these churches could find encouragement to give thanks to God and worship him.

In what ways do these seven letters develop an understanding of the central thought in the introduction that Jesus 'loves us and [has] freed us from our sins by his blood, and [has] made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Revelation 1:5, 6)?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

The seven letters to the churches cover a range of real life situations. What circumstances are identified in the affirmations, rebukes and warnings contained in the seven letters? In what ways do these messages to the churches urge the believers to trust God?

In what ways does the sense of Exodus provided by the focus on the liberating love of Christ enrich this encouragement to trust God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph?

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

Build a picture of the promises given to those who are faithful in these seven churches. Consider ways in which these various themes relate to the description of Jesus given in Revelation 1.

Reflect on passages from elsewhere in Scripture that inform your understanding of these promises.

Reflection

The promises given to the seven churches were not wishful thinking or baseless optimism. They were founded on the certainty of God himself, revealed by the Holy Spirit in and by the humanity of Jesus Christ. The promises of life (Ephesus), hope (Smyrna), renewal (Pergamum), opportunity (Thyatira), purity (Sardis), love (Philadelphia) and destiny (Laodicea) speak of the Lamb-Shepherd of Revelation 5:1–14 and 7:13–17.³⁰ The Lion-Lamb-Shepherd contrasts the opposition faced by the seven churches. This resistance is to the ransoming liberation of the one who is 'in the midst of the lampstands' (Revelation 1:13).

It is the rejection of this work of God in Christ that precipitates the disasters that unfold when the seals are opened and God insists on his own majesty, holiness, love and glory. It is this divine action that ultimately disarms the terrorist and the

³⁰ See Living Treasures, *Seven Promises for God's People*.

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tyrant, and before which no-one can stand (cf. Philippians 2:5–11). The rest of the book of Revelation further explores these themes, ultimately revealing not an escape to heaven as earth disintegrates, but a terrestrial renewal as a new Jerusalem comes down from heaven.

The seven letters therefore are preparatory messages before the outcomes that result from believing response and faithless rejection are described. They emphasise that an ‘us and them’ mentality easily misses the spiritual battles that occur within all of us as we wrestle with the crises and concerns of life.

Next time

The opening of the seven seals suggests that the visions of divine and celestial glory revealed before the seals are opened will disclose further majestic wonders and precious treasures. The opposite seems to happen as the invitation to come announces horrible disasters. In what ways are these visions to be understood by the seven-fold church of the living God?³¹

³¹ Appendix 2 might help readers reflect on the way they think about God’s action in the world.

Understanding the present; anticipating the future – 2

Revelation 4:1–8:1

Introduction

The seven seals, like the seven letters, come after a heavenly vision. Before the seals are opened John describes two scenes. Firstly, he saw ‘one seated on the throne’, along with ‘the seven spirits of God’, twenty-four elders, four living creatures and ‘something like a sea of glass, like crystal’ (Revelation 4:1–7). This divine being is ascribed holiness, glory, honour and power because of his creative activity (Revelation 4:8–11).

In the second scene attention moves to ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David’, who is also ‘the Lamb that was slaughtered’ (Revelation 5:1–14). He is given the same status as the one on the throne, and then opens the seals. After opening six of the seals two more visions are given, this time of the people of God (Revelation 7:1–17). The opening of the last seal brings half an hour of silence before the next cycle of revelations (Revelation 8:1).

Discovery

Knowing God’s love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Revelation 1:9–20 describes ‘one like the Son of Man’. The focus of Revelation 4:1–11 is on an unnamed person on a throne and the ‘seven spirits of God’, while chapter five identifies Christ as the Lion-Lamb who, accompanied by the same ‘seven spirits of God’, unlocks human history. Who is God revealed to be in these passages?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

The first four seals identify turmoil on earth: The first seal is about inter-national conquest (Revelation 6:1, 2); the second seal concerns intra-national conquest or civil strife (Revelation 6:3, 4); the third seal identifies ecological disaster (Revelation 6:5, 6); while the fourth seal nominates death, and so includes sickness. The fifth and sixth seals provide a heavenly focus: seal five on suffering and martyrdom (Revelation 6:9–11) and seal six on ‘the wrath of the Lamb’ (Revelation 6:12–17). In what ways do these seals speak about the difficulties and dangers faced by the people of God?

In what ways are we to understand the connections between the opening of the seals and the revelation of God in Revelation 1:9–20, 4:1–11 and 5:1–14? Consider these links in terms of the *way* God works and the *responses* to this work that are depicted when the Lamb opens the seals.

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

Two scenes follow that describe the people of God. They have 'the seal of the living God' and are seen after going through 'the great ordeal' (Revelation 7:1–17). In what ways do these visions provide encouragement and hope for those in the seven churches and those who suffer when the six seals are opened?

In what ways does the opening of the first four seals confirm what has been already outlined in Revelation?

Reflection

The Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh* is grouped under the Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Nevi'im*) and Writings (*Ketuvim*).³² The Law is bookended by the first two chapters of Genesis and Deuteronomy 27 to 34, where its belief framework is outlined. The two trees in Eden and the blessings and curses 'set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity' (Deuteronomy 30:15). The choice nominated did not primarily involve a legalistic or moral code or system, but referred to the people's relationship with the living God who brought them out of Egypt. His 'word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe' (Deuteronomy 30:14). Central to the Pentateuch was the provision of atonement (e.g. Leviticus 17:11). The prophets emphasise and affirm this understanding. Habakkuk, for example, wrote of these two alternatives: 'Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith' (Habakkuk 2:1–4). The silence after the seventh seal correlates with Habakkuk 2:14, 20 and 3:1, 2.

The Wisdom writings reflect something of Israel's struggle with this teaching. As it does for all humanity, human life involved them in a range of complexities not easily resolved into choices between faithfulness and rebellion. Mortality from suffering, sickness, famine, sin, persecution and general human transience often contradicts a mechanical obedience-disobedience interpretation of life based on an inadequate reading of the Law.

Eschatological questions emerge from this tension, and Revelation 1:9 to 8:1 provides something of an answer: life is not meaningless, death is not the final word, and Christ Jesus is the Lion-Lamb who has provided atonement.

The declarations of Revelation 7 are set against the backgrounds of the devastation described in chapter 6 and the struggles in chapters 2 and 3. They indicate to the audience of this book that the God revealed in Revelation 1, 4 and 5 is concerned for their welfare. God's concern might not be fully evident in this life, but it will be in eternity (Revelation 7:9–17). Moreover, it will then be clear that God's character is consistent: the opening of the seals is not an act of divine

³² See footnote 8.

vindictiveness, but the unveiling of the Lamb of God who has given himself to remove the world's evil (John 1:19–36; Revelation 5:1–14).³³ The Jesus of the Apocalypse, the Jesus of the Epistles and the Jesus of John's Gospel are one person acting without being 'good cop' on earth and 'bad cop' in heaven! There is neither conflict between the divine persons, nor between God's attributes, nor between the qualities of God, nor between the ways God acts in different eras. The terrible events described when the seals are opened all involve actions opposing God. Each evil action is a reversal of a quality evident in God.

Next time

The silence described in Revelation 8:1 sets the scene for the seven trumpets that break the quiet. What does it mean for all the earth and all of heaven to be silent before God (cf. Habakkuk 2:20)?

³³ There are nearly thirty references to the Lamb in Revelation. This may be an intentional statement that the way the Lamb acts, including the 'wrath of the Lamb' is to be understood from the Gospel and the Epistles as well as from the Apocalypse. If this is the case, then the upper room discourse, the high-priestly prayer and Jesus' three words from the Cross recorded in John's Gospel provide a context for understanding the opening of the seals, the sounding of the trumpets, the pouring out of the seven bowls, and the other related visions and scenes.

Ceaseless worship and sacred silence

Revelation 1:1–8:1

Introduction

The first seven chapters of Revelation reveal a meta-narrative regarding the persecution and suffering experienced by the seven churches. The first chapter gives assurance that they are loved by God, and that he is about an ultimate liberation, a final Exodus, which will see them ‘come out of the great ordeal’ and not experience hunger, thirst or searing heat. He will guide them to ‘springs of the water of life’, to an eternal Elim, without sorrow or grief (Revelation 7:13–17; cf. Exodus 15:17; Numbers 33:9). The cataclysmic events indicated by the seven seals do not determine the people of God’s doom, but disclose their destiny. Sadly, human empires and their emperors do not repent as an eternal, innumerable and diverse community of cleansed and sanctified humanity is revealed in grace and mercy.

Revelation 4, 5 and 7 indicate that this meta-narrative has foundations in Israel’s history and in the actions of Jesus as Messiah and Lord (cf. Revelation 1:9–20). As previously mentioned, in the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch’s bookends describe life-blessings and death-curses. Exodus and Numbers describe Israel’s journey from slavery to safety and sanctuary, with the gift of atonement mentioned in the centre of Leviticus. The prophets called the people to embrace these understandings and live accordingly, and so their teachings explore what it means for God to fulfil his creational intentions and promises. The Writings wrestle with and rejoice in the work-out of this narrative in the everyday experiences of the people of God. They are filled with wonder and lament, and delight and dismay, as their authors reflect on the meaning of trust, hope and faith in the living God.

It is this context, with addition of the Jesus-event described in the Gospels, Acts and other Letters, that informs the book of Revelation, and places it as a New Testament, Christian Wisdom book. Revelation focuses on the sovereignty of Jesus in everyday life, exploring the impact of the gospel as the herald of a new heavens and a new earth. It gives us wisdom about who God is and the way he is working, and so about how we are called to live.

Discovery

Knowing God’s love and worshipping God with thanks ...

The focus of the celestial worship described in Revelation 4 and 5 moves from the one sitting on the throne to the Lamb, ‘standing as if it had been slaughtered’ (Revelation 5:6). From this verse to Revelation 8:1 the Lamb is named eleven

times, and referred to on other occasions.³⁴ What do we learn about the Lamb from these verses? In what ways does this expand our understanding of John 1:29–36?

In what ways does the introduction in Revelation 1:4–8 and the vision of Christ in Revelation 1:9–20 correlate with these descriptions?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

The initiatives Jesus is described as taking in John's Gospel elicit a variety of responses. In what ways do the actions that follow the opening of the seals in Revelation 6 and 8:1 inform us about the character and purpose of the one enthroned in heaven, and 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 4:1ff, 5:6, 7).

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

In what ways do the promises given to the people of God in Revelation 1:1 to 8:1 act as judgements on those who insist on opposing the one on the throne, the Lamb and the Holy Spirit?

Reflection

Celestial worship includes the half-hour of silence mentioned in chapter 8 verse 1, just as the prophet Habakkuk sensed (Habakkuk 2:20; cf. Psalms 29, 46, 62, 123 and 131). There is something very sacred about liminal space. The in-between is where self-reflection, other-person honour and divine worship know peace and well-being. Liminality may come between seasons of trouble and tragedy in the transitoriness of life about which Qoheleth wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:1–11. It was perhaps in this kind of liminality that this Apocalypse came to John on Patmos (Revelation 1:9, 10). The divine response to angry human empire building seen in Psalm 2, and called the 'wrath of the Lamb' in Revelation 6:16 and 17, is not a divine, intemperate fury or rage. It is the serenity of the sanctuary outlined in Revelation 4 and 5 and realised in chapter 7. The 'wrath of the Lamb' is the intra-personal and inter-personal turmoil that comes from rejecting the grace and peace of the Almighty (Revelation 1:4–8). Thankfully, Revelation 6 indicates that there are boundaries to the revulsion of evil against the mercies of God.

The prayers of the saints offered in this in-between space, and in the awful 'great ordeal' are heard (Revelation 7:13, 14). The hearers and readers of this personal encounter of John with the voice of 'one like the Son of Man' who spoke to him

³⁴ The Lamb is named in Revelation 5:6, 8, 12, 13, 6:1, 16, 7:9, 10, 14, 17 and 8:1. The Lamb is referred to in Revelation 5:6–10 and 6:3–12. The Lamb is then mentioned in Revelation 12:11, 13:8, 14:1, 4, 10, 15:3, 17:14, 19:7, 9, 21:9, 14, 22, 27 and 22:1, 3. In Revelation 13:11 a beast appears with 'two horns like a lamb', mimicking the Lamb.

from among the lampstands would have noted that the answer to their prayers centred in 'the blood of the Lamb' in which they washed their robes (Revelation 1:9–20, 7:13, 14). The Lamb does not describe a remote deity but God present in the *now* and committed to being *with* them in their struggles and suffering.

The opening of the seals is best considered as the unveiling of the celestial worship of Revelation 4 and 5. This good news provokes the same hostility that we read of in the Gospels. The disasters and death that come when the seals are opened result from rejecting God's being and purpose in creation. These reactions are all counterparts to the Lamb's grace and peace, and they all fail to defeat him, as is evident in the renewal described in Revelation 7. Sacred silence replaces tragic defiance and triumphant deliverance, and we wait for more revelation about the ultimate victory of God.

Next time

The sounding of the seven trumpets develops the themes detailed as the seven seals are opened. In what ways does Revelation 7 encourage faith, hope and love in a community of believers, and prepare the people of God for the inevitable struggles that come in life?

Present and promised victory – 2

Overcoming the world system – 1

Revelation 8:2–11:18

Introduction

The blowing of the seven trumpets in Revelation 8:2 to 11:18 has correlations with the opening of the seals, even though the trumpeters are angels while the Lamb opened the seals. In both cases, heavenly activity leads to events that are not aligned with God's mercy, grace and peace. This reverse and negative pattern points to rejection of the action of God in Christ and by the Spirit throughout history, and heralds the emergence of the triumph of God as he delivers people from oppression, violence, greed and misery.

This section of Revelation begins with God's response to prayers from his people and ends by referring to a temple, to prophetic witness, to violent rejection and to ongoing divine action. The passage concludes with the seventh trumpet and 'loud voices in heaven' celebrating Messiah's victory over angry and defiant worldly kingdoms (Revelation 11:15). Two progressions are occurring: firstly, the suffering people of God have their prayers answered through Messiah's victory, and secondly, evil empires steadily decline and disappear after causing great distress.

The seven thunders remind the churches of the giving of the law at Sinai, of Elijah at Horeb, and of Psalm 29 (Exodus 19:9ff; 1 Kings 19:9ff). Thunders are mentioned at the start of this section and the start of the next one (Revelation 8:5, 11:19).

Discovery

Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

In what ways do the trumpet sounds act as proclamations of the coming victory of God describing in Revelation 11:15–18? What can we learn about the person and action of God from the descriptions of rejection that follow the sounding of the trumpets?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

In what ways are the prayers mentioned in Revelation 8:1–5 seen to be answered in these chapters? What events occur that would suggest to those who were praying that their prayers are not being heard?

In what ways does the emphasis on the prophetic testimony and witness of the people of God in Revelation 11:1–13 inform the reader of and listener to this book about the plan and purpose of God, and the way it affects humanity in times of belief and unbelief (see also Revelation 10:8–11)?

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

In what ways do the references to prayer in Revelation 8:1–5, to the fulfilment of the ‘mystery of God’ in Revelation 10:7, to the resurrection of the witnesses in Revelation 11:11–13, and to Messiah’s victory in Revelation 11:15–18, provide an increasing emphasis on hope?

Reflection

The theme of this section moves from God’s salvation by the Lamb opening the seven seals, to the people of God and their testimony to his mercy and grace, and to the sounding of the seven trumpets. It changes from the person of the Lamb and his death and resurrection to the proclamation of the gospel to a defiant humanity, and to the victory of Messiah. In these sections, the disclosure of the Lamb-Messiah and the people of God is contrasted by the decline and defeat of rebellious human empires.

The sounding of the trumpets and the preaching of the gospel indicate God’s concern for ecological care, for good relationships between different nations, and for an economic prosperity not based on exploitation. God wants to replace evil power, pollution and relational domination with personal well-being, community life, and purity and holiness. He wants to facilitate harmony within and throughout his creation. As with the opening of the seals, the blowing of the trumpets is met with fierce resistance, but it is a refusal that is not sustained against the goodness, love, holiness, truth and righteousness of God in Christ, testified to by his Spirit. The apparent victory of evil is seductive and deceitful, and brings its own deluded self-imposed destruction.

The unveiling of the people of God in this section of Revelation follows the offering of ‘a great quantity of incense ... with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne’ (Revelation 8:3). There is protection provided for the people of God in the turmoil arising from the defiance of rebellious rulers (Revelation 9:4), although the ‘two witnesses’ of Revelation 11:1ff do not escape persecution or death (cf. Revelation 10:8–11).

Trumpets 5 to 7 explore what the terror following trumpets 1 to 4 looks like at a people level as well as at a global level. These two groups of trumpets expose negatives of who God is and of the proclamation of the gospel, ‘the mystery of God’ (Revelation 10:7). It is this proclamation, this mystery, that wins the victory, albeit at considerable cost (cf. Revelation 1, 4 and 5)!

Victory occurs without divine force or violence. It happens because of God’s refusal to behave like those opposed to him. It is heralded by the suffering, prophetic testimony of the people of God. While there is much detail about rebellion and defiance, there is no description of conflict or armed opposition by the followers of Messiah-Lamb. Their victory is unequivocal and effective. The sound of the seventh trumpet is the ultimate woe for a weary, self-destructive and

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rebellious world. Human efforts to establish a counterpart to the kingdom of heaven are exposed as counterfeit and untenable. Heavenly celebrations parallel the silence after the seventh seal is opened. The sounding of the seventh trumpet makes it clear that 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and [that] he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15). An eternal reality is established, as the twenty-four elders recognise (Revelation 11:17, 18):

We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.'

Next time

What can it mean for the people of God to 'keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus' in the face of severe persecution (Revelation 12:7)? What encouragement can they find in times of deep suffering and anguish knowing that God is not their accuser? What does it mean that the one who accuses them has been 'thrown down', and that they conquer by the 'blood of the Lamb' (Revelation 12:9–13)? What form of worship results from victory in these circumstances?

Overcoming the world system – 2

Revelation 11:19–15:4

Introduction

The witness of the people of God, and their prayers for protection and deliverance, provide a context for Revelation 8:2–11:18. The seven visions in Revelation 13:1 to 15:4 are intense and contrasting.³⁵ They describe spiritual powers resisting the victory of the Lamb, and follow an account of a woman giving birth to a son in Revelation 12:1–6. With hints of Genesis 3:14 and 15, Psalm 2 and Matthew 2, John describes their rescue.

After the attempt of ‘the Devil and Satan’ to destroy the child, we read of their defeat by ‘Michael and his angels’, followed by a further celebration of the victory of God. The impact of this victory is not complete, as woe is assigned ‘to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!’ (Revelation 12:7–12).

The account then returns to the woman and her son. The dragon wages war against them and ‘the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus’ (Revelation 12:17).

As with the opening of the seals and the sounding of the trumpets, the visions fall into two groups. The first four include two calls for endurance and faith, and one for wisdom (Revelation 13:10, 18, 14:12). They describe not only the source of false worship and the terrifying coercion applied to those who are aligned to it, but also the true worship of the redeemed (Revelation 14:1–5).

Despite, or because of, the horror and terror of the beasts in Revelation 13, the purging of evil from creation has an extra level of finality in the seven visions. The second last vision refers to ‘seven angels with seven plagues’. These plagues ‘are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended’, and form the basis for the pouring out of the ‘seven bowls of the wrath of God’ (Revelation 15:1, 8, 16:1ff). The focus in the last three visions moves from the revelation of the Son of Man to the plagues and to worship of God and the Lamb. The revelation of the judgements includes the contrast between the justice, truth, holiness and glory of God and the Lamb, and the perversity of evil. The wrath of God and the devil’s wrath are both referred to in these passages: they are quite different, and warrant careful consideration. The contrast between promise and plague is clear.

³⁵ The visions all start with ‘I saw’ or ‘I looked’ (Revelation 13:1, 13:11, 14:1, 6, 14, 15:1, 2).

Discovery

Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Although the liberating love of Christ was central to the introduction of this book, Christ's love is only explicitly mentioned again in the letters to the churches (Revelation 1:5, 3:9, 19). Yet it would be unwise to equate the silence about God's love with its absence. It is preferable to assume its presence, not ignore it. God does not cease being the God of love when faced with defiance. It is this love that is victorious! With this theme in mind, and in the light of Revelation 12:10–11, 14:1–3 and 15:3, 4, what understanding of God's person and action is being presented?

Given God's victory over evil, and God's judgement against the nations, contrast the accusations and malice of Satanic and demonic evil with the affirmations of Jesus as Messiah and Lamb, and of God the Father.

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

What does it mean for the people of God to conquer 'by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' and to 'hold the testimony of Jesus' (Revelation 12:11, 17)? In what ways does this relate to 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (cf. Revelation 1:2, 5, 9, 3:14, 6:9, 11:3, 7)?

The dragon attacked 'those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus' (Revelation 12:17). In what ways are the opening of the seals on the scroll linked with God's commandments, and the sounding of the trumpets connected to Jesus' testimony? In what ways is the implicit Exodus theme in Revelation 1:5 developed in the Song of Moses and the Lamb in Revelation 15:2–4?

In what ways are the descriptions of evil powers negatives of those of God and Christ? What does this teach about the counterfeit and deceitful nature of wickedness and rebellion?

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

In what ways do the two calls 'for the endurance and faith of the saints' and the call for wisdom encourage hope in God's victory and triumph (Revelation 13:10, 18, 14:12)?

Consider ways in which true worship anticipates the fulfilment of the promises of God (cf. Revelation 12:10–11, 14:1–3 and 15:3, 4)?

Reflection

There is an increase in the intensity of language in these visions and in the account of the woman and son. The sense of finality is indicated by the regular statement of time limits, including that the devil's time is short. The harvest is reaped because

the time has arrived, and the seven angels with the seven plagues signal the end of God's wrath. The opening of 'the temple of the tent of witness in heaven' begins the next section of the book (Revelation 15:5, cf. 11:19 which starts this section).

Another indicator of strengthened emphasis relates to the terms wrath, anger and rage. The wrath of God and the Lamb is only mentioned before this section in Revelation 6:16 and 17, but occurs five times in these verses (Revelation 11:18, 14:10 twice, 14:19, 15:1). There are another four references to God's wrath in the remaining chapters, along with the pouring of the seven bowls being linked with God's wrath (Revelation 15:7, 16:1, 19, 19:15). We read how 'The nations raged, but [God's] wrath has come', adding to the contrast between evil and God (Revelation 11:18, 12:12, 17, 14:8).

One clue to understanding God's wrath is in the references to the Lamb, who in John's Gospel removes the world's sin and overcomes darkness with light (John 1:1–5, 29ff; cf. 1 John 1). God's wrath is not rage as evil rages. God restores, renews and reconciles through Christ the Lamb. Evil spiritual powers and defiant humanity experience inner turmoil and relational antagonism when faced with the glory and majesty of God, the testimony of Jesus and his followers, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. Revelation 6:15–17). The wrath of God is not hostility, vindictiveness and malice within God's being. It is precisely the opposite. Nothing is more radically defining of God than his refusal to endorse any evil disposition or action, and by his insistence to work for the renewal of all creation. His holy love comes in grace and mercy to bring about his goal.

It is worth therefore dwelling on the reverse of the beastly behaviour, and on joining in authentic praise and thanksgiving (cf. Revelation 14:5). It is in fearing God (Revelation 11:18), in being thankful for his power in reigning (Revelation 11:17), and in sharing the good news (Revelation 11:3) that seven visions are shared. God's wrath never accuses. Those who inhabit his kingdom are not seen using military strategies. They rely on God for deliverance (Revelation 12:10, 11, 17, 13:10). Revelation 14:1–7 contrasts the inner raging of evil with the glory, purity and worship of the redeemed. God alone is holy, and his amazing victory is not won by the vicious violence used by evil (Revelation 15:1–4).

The 'great wine-press of the wrath of God' is God's action against the inner turmoil, bitterness and viciousness of those opposed to the liberating love and holy glory of the one on the throne, the slaughtered Lamb, and the 'seven spirits who are before his throne' (Revelation 1:4). There is, of course, in this judgement a clear warning for the redeemed, and not just the rebellious.

If the Lamb is victorious by shining light into and from within darkness, then calls for endurance, faith and wisdom are very significant for people facing trouble and tragedy. The 'eternal gospel' proclaimed 'to every nation and tribe and language and people' produces a community who are blessed not only with 'rest from their

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labours', but with their deeds accompanying them into the eternal city (Revelation 14:6, 7, 13). There is ample warning and abundant encouragement in those times when we listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (as in Revelation 2 and 3).

Next time

What does it mean for God to defeat evil spiritual powers? What can the people of God hope for when they read of the 'blood of saints and prophets' being shed (Revelation 16:6)? Why is their worship said to include 'the song of Moses, the servant of God', as well as 'the song of the Lamb' (Revelation 15:1–4)?

Defeating evil spiritual powers – 1

Revelation 15:5–16:21

Introduction

The pouring ‘out on the earth [of] the seven bowls of the wrath of God’ indicates a direct, personal, divine action against evil (Revelation 16:1). There are clear parallels between the pouring out of the bowls, the opening of the seals and the sounding of the trumpets. In each series of events, there is mention of God’s response to those who have persecuted and/or murdered people. Divine judgement is ‘true and just’ because it is the expression of God’s love, holiness and glory, and not of the kind of action depicted by the beasts and those who worship it and its image (Revelation 16:4–7).

The pouring of the first four bowls impacts the earth, the sea, the rivers and the sky. The brief description given may indicate that detail regarding these judgements has already been covered, and will be seen again in the revelations that follow. The pouring of the fifth to seventh bowls confirms the finality of these judgements. Darkness accompanies failure to repent and the battle preparation of those who persisting in opposing ‘the great day of God the Almighty’ (Revelation 16:14). The pouring of the final bowl is accompanied by ‘a loud voice [coming] out of the temple, from the throne, saying “It is done!”’ (Revelation 16:17). This brief and dramatic section concludes with no evidence of any change of mind; just more angry cursing of God.

Discovery

Knowing God’s love and worshipping God with thanks ...

References to the heavenly temple, and to God’s glory, relate to his holiness, justice, truth and liberating love (cf. Revelation 1). In what ways do the pouring of the bowls of wrath indicate that God in Christ identifies with trauma and tribulation, rather than being its source and cause?

What do God’s use of bowls and cups, and the Apocalyptic reference to them, indicate about authentic worship, and genuine community and family life?

In what ways can the pouring ‘out on the earth of the seven bowls of the wrath of God’ encourage recognition of creation and life as divine gifts, and so increase legitimate concerns for the earth, sea, sky, rivers, and springs that nourish living beings and enable them to flourish (cf. Genesis 1; Psalm 65; Isaiah 32:14–20)?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

In what ways do these temple-actions teach wisdom, and provide help in not being seduced or deceived by false worship, or in experiencing untimely death (Revelation 16:2–4)? In what ways do these temple-actions assist in not being drawn into cursing God and suffering the searing heat of desert dryness and

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abandonment (Revelation 16:8, cf. 7:13–17; Psalm 68:1–6)? In what ways do these temple actions enable resistance to foul spirits, false prophecy and deceptive signs (Revelation 16:13, 14; cf. 1 John 3 to 5)?

The references to appropriate and valid justice as in ‘It is what they deserve!’ (Revelation 16:6) suggest that the people of God can be confident about divine restraint when judgement occurs. Does the Apocalypse mean:

- God’s wrath is independent of God’s mercy: that God shows some people mercy and love; while others experience wrath and judgement?
- God’s mercy is within God’s wrath: that God is right to judge all, but by grace shows mercy only to some, who then escape judgement?
- God’s wrath is within his mercy: God acts mercifully towards everyone, with his judgement and wrath being the inner and relational turmoil that come from human defiance and deviation, and God’s refusal to bless evil intentions but rather to rescue and save in the unresolved mystery of his grace and kindness?

It may be helpful to consider Habakkuk’s prophecy, especially chapter 3:1 in this context!

Living in hope of God’s promised fullness for his people ...

Consider ways in which the emphasis on ‘all nations’ in the song of Moses and the Lamb, given between the sixth vision and the sight of the temple of witness and the pouring of the seven bowls of wrath, encourages hope and expectation among God’s people (Revelation 16:1–4).

Reflect on the differences between nations coming and worshipping God (cf. Isaiah 2:1ff; Micah 4:1ff), and the doomed, false worship in Revelation 16.

In the context of this section of the Apocalypse, in what ways does the affirmation that Jesus, Messiah-Lamb, is ‘coming like a thief’ bring blessings and hope to Christians who are being persecuted? What does it mean to be awake, clothed and unashamed?

Reflection

As in the previous two sections, the doom and decline of evil is described alongside the victory by God and his promises of blessing and renewal for those who trust him (cf. Revelation 16:15). It is wrong, in reading these verses, to assign to God the kind of murderous responses that accord with the beastly evil of false spirituality and deviant humanity. In this section of the Apocalypse the people of God are told to ‘stay awake and be clothed’ and not to be ‘naked and exposed to shame’ (Revelation 16:15). This is a reminder of Genesis 2:25 and the sad events that followed.

There is no hint of a call for violent or vicious responses to evil. God's people are not to humiliate, disgrace and dishonour themselves by acting in the same way as those opposing God. Their dignity and decency is a God-given gift that is to evoke respect and praise, not elicit contempt and censure. To be blameless is to be in harmony with God's holiness and glory. It is to be filled with God's love and truth. Seeing this affirmation of peaceful non-aggression focuses attention on the way the unequivocal divine response to evil occurs. When God's people demean themselves by inappropriate responses to evil, they go against his holiness, goodness, truth, righteousness and love, and act like the powers of darkness that God defeats by his mercy and grace.

By setting the pouring out of the bowls in the context of the temple being 'filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power', the ways in which God's judgements are enacted is clear. There is no alteration in God with God, having loved humanity long enough, finally reacting in judgement. John has mentioned that when the Lamb had 'taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints' (Revelation 5:8, cf. 21:9). The redemptive nature of God's action in Christ is that which evil and wickedness despise and oppose, and which brings them to curse God and self-immolate by failing to repent.

Bowls in the Hebrew Bible refer to food preparation and drink offerings in the Tabernacle and Temple (Exodus 8:3, 12:34, 25:29, 37:16; Numbers 4:7; Deuteronomy 28:5, 17; 1 Kings 7:41, 42; 2 Kings 2:12, 13, etc.). Bowls are also connected to judgement (Isaiah 51:17, 22; Amos 6:6; cf. Matthew 26:23). The book of Zechariah also includes references to bowls in the context of the Temple (Zechariah 4:2, 9:15, 14:20). A means of provision, nourishment, well-being and restoration becomes a symbol of defiance, defeat and doom where the human spirit is not in accord with the testimony of Jesus Christ as the Lamb who, by his death and resurrection, removes sin from the world.

The 'wine-cup' carries the same layers of meaning (Revelation 16:19; cf. Matthew 10:42, 20:22, 23:25, 26:27ff; Mark 10:38; Luke 22:17ff, 42; John 18:11; 1 Corinthians 10:16ff; 11:25ff). As Paul wrote to the Roman church:

Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. You say, 'We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.' Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance (Romans 2:1–4)?

Next time

What wisdom can God's people learn from the self-destructive demise and implosion of Babylon the Great and her arrogant and sudden immolation to a site of silence and darkness, devoid of industry and culture?

Defeating evil spiritual powers – 2

Revelation 17:1–19:10

Introduction

The contrast between the ‘abominations and the impurities’ of evil powers and the martyred ‘saints’ who are ‘witnesses to Jesus’ is again displayed (Revelation 17:4). The distinction is clearly outlined between those whose names are in the ‘book of life from the foundation of the world’ and those involved in the sordid immorality of the earthly empires represented by the kings, the woman and the beast (Revelation 17:8). While there is unity of purpose in attacking the Lamb, these powers are ultimately divisive, self-destructive and doomed to fail. The ‘called and chosen and faithful’ rely on the ‘Lord of lords and King of kings’ to defeat this seemingly insurmountable opposition (Revelation 17:13–17).

After two accounts that outline the defeat of ‘Babylon the great’ and ‘the mystery of the woman’ (Revelation 17:1–6 and 17:7–18), two further descriptions describe the fall of Babylon and the arrogance of the woman (Revelation 18:1–3 and 18:4–20). The woman who thought she was a queen experiences the grief of widowhood. In one hour, all her prosperity is ravaged and ruined. Nothing of her apparent abundance ever flourishes again; nothing thrives anymore. The details in these descriptions develop themes covered when the seals were opened, the trumpets were sounded and the bowls were poured out.³⁶

Whereas in the previous sections, the victory of God and the defeat of evil continue in parallel for all seven stages, the last three descriptions in this section (from Revelation 18:20–19:8) focus on the joy of ‘a great multitude in heaven’ (Revelation 19:1). The first one in this group details the end of persecution and martyrdom (Revelation 18:20–24). The second one affirms God’s ‘Salvation and glory and power’ (Revelation 19:1–5), while the last one expands the vision of chapters 4 and 5 to mention the imminent ‘marriage of the Lamb’ to his pure and righteous bride (Revelation 19:6–8). This section of seven visions finishes with John testifying that these events were overwhelmingly magnificent, especially given the horrors he had already described. The angel assured him that to ‘hold the testimony of Jesus’ is to embrace ‘the spirit of prophecy’ (Revelation 19:9–10).

Discovery

Knowing God’s love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Reflect on the behaviour of the ‘saints’ and ‘the witnesses to Jesus’ that is implied by the reference to the ‘woman’ being ‘drunk’ with their blood (Revelation 17:6).

³⁶ Appendices 3 and 4 provide brief discussions about several issues arising from the language used to describe Babylon and the bride.

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What can we learn about the nature of God from what he endorses (e.g. Revelation 19:1–8) and what he opposes (e.g. Revelation 17 and 18)?

In what ways is the wisdom called for in Revelation 17:9 linked with mentions of the Lamb who ‘is Lord of lords and King of kings’, and of ‘those with him [who] are called and chosen and faithful’ in Revelation 17:14?

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

Consider the comfort being offered to the first readers of this book, and to those since then who also read it, by the reference to having their names written in the ‘book of life from the foundation of the world’, and to their being described as ‘called and chosen and faithful’ (Revelation 17:8, 14).

Reflect on the certainty of suffering and death facing, and faced by many ‘prophets and saints’, and the ways in which evil is described as not being permanently present and going to ‘destruction’ (e.g. Revelation 17:8, 18:24).

What assurances for God’s people are there in references to God’s judgement being ‘true and just’, and to the ‘righteous deeds of saints’ (Revelation 19:2, 8)?

Living in hope of God’s promised fullness for his people ...

Review the self-destructive nature of evil described in Revelation 17 and 18, including in Revelation 18:8.

What does John mean by writing that ‘the words of God will be fulfilled’ (Revelation 17:17)?

What encouragements are there in the three descriptions of victory provided in Revelation 18:20–19:8?

What does it mean now, and what will it mean at the time of the ‘marriage’, to be ‘invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’ (Revelation 19:9, 10)?

Reflection

It is too simplistic to read this book as describing two alternative groups, where one is ‘them’, describing ‘those people’ and ‘their’ evil spirituality as being like Satan, the world, etc., and another group being ‘us’, who are (by faith, of course) good like God, and destined for heaven. Not only is humanity divided within itself, each of us deals with our own inner struggles. The letters to the churches are clear enough about the tensions that existed in those communities. There were also people outside of these churches at the time of writing who later came to be God’s people. Humility and caution about the implicit and explicit markers we use to determine ‘them’ and ‘us’ are needed. Our criteria may fall well short of those of the one on the throne, who with the Lamb and the Holy Spirit, works out his purposes by his own holiness and love. John, in receiving the visions was so impacted by them that even he did not always respond appropriately

(Revelation 19:9, 10)! While the Apocalypse is about actual events, it is analysing phenomena before it is describing history. Its apocalyptic language calls for great caution when applying it to historical eras and events. Our proximity to our own stories should warn us about our verdicts.

The twenty-two chapters of Revelation teach principles that wise people can learn to help them understand life's dilemmas, delights and difficulties. These principles are not abstract ideas and remote concepts; they are the heart, mind, soul and spirit of Jesus Christ. They come to us by the Holy Spirit, and are reflective of the life of God; of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are declared to us as God's eternal gospel, and its promised restoration and renewal. They encourage hope and anticipation, and speak of eternal life, joy and peace together, in creation and with God. They bring us the comfort of God's mercy and grace when we reflect on our lives and find seasons where our hearts and minds were all too aligned with the evil powers described here. This comfort assures us of the goodness of God's judgements, and the ways in which they oppose the vengeful verdicts of evil.

The narrative of evil tells us a great deal about the story of grace, mercy and peace that is unveiled in the glory of the heavenly visions. While evil is frantically and intensely driven to establish its dominion, God is not described as doing anything in much detail. Evil, despite its vast efforts and enterprise, is defeated; the Lamb of God is victorious. It would be too hasty to interpret statements of divine action as implying sudden events. They may be that, but they may also be summarising godly processes. Either way, the focus is on the Lamb conquering even though he was himself slaughtered. More than that, it is the Lamb who is Lord because he has conquered by his death, and whose reign expresses that conquest.

The constant testimony and witness given to the people of God in the book of Revelation is that no matter how invasive, ugly and horrible evil is at a political, military, social or person level, God's victory is in and through his Lamb. The testimony about the Lamb of God in John 1:29–36 is affirmed. The Lamb of God removes sin, and does so without any evil behaviour. That is his judgement on evil, his opposition to evil, and his 'wrath' against evil.

The emphasis on the testimony and witness of the suffering community of believers is firmly set in the context of 'the testimony of Jesus' (Revelation 15:5ff, 17:6, 19:10, 20:4). The people of God are witnesses of Jesus' testimony. We are, in one sense, his testimony. We are evidence of what God does, and our lives and words are prophetic indicators of the Word of God who speaks by the Spirit of God from creation to consummation.

Next time

In what ways does the victory of God compare with and contrast to the defeat of evil, especially when the first century church experience at times appeared to be quite the opposite?

Unveiling eternity; victory here and now – 1

Revelation 19:11–21:8

Introduction

God's defeat of evil powers is described in four dramatic visions. In the first vision, 'Faithful and True' treads 'the wine-press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty' (Revelation 19:11–16). Two visions tell of birds from mid-heaven being invited to 'the great supper of God' where they gorge themselves on those with the 'mark of the beast' who 'worshipped its image' (Revelation 19:17–21). The fourth vision links with the first vision in the second half of this section by its reference to a thousand years and speaks of the imprisonment of evil powers (Revelation 20:1–3).³⁷

There is a clear sequence in these first four visions, with increasing intensity. After hearing about God's victory over the nations, we are told about the defeat of powerful rulers. The beast and the false prophet as well as rebellious humanity are then highlighted, before the seizure of 'the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan' is described (Revelation 20:2). The sequence moves towards a final climax before indicating that after the thousand years, Satan 'must be let out for a little while' (Revelation 20:3).

This segue into the final three visions in this section sets the scene for what may be called the final finality. The devil, the beast and the false prophet fail at their last desperate and defiant rebellion, and so consequently suffer torment 'forever and ever' (Revelation 20:10). Their imprisonment during the thousand years is very brief compared to their final doom. The penultimate vision in this section describes the final judgement of humanity. The 'second death, the lake of fire' is the destiny for 'Death and Hades', as well as those not listed in the 'book of life' (Revelation 20:11–15). Earlier, John had written of the 'first resurrection', and the assurance that this second death was powerless against those already raised. The use of 'first' and 'second' points to the nature of Christ's Lordship as Messiah and Lamb. There is no mention of a first death or a second resurrection.

The account of the 'coming down out of heaven from God' of the 'holy city, the new Jerusalem' develops themes found in chapters 1 and 7. The statement of divine majesty and sovereignty in Revelation 20:11 uses spatial separation to make its point, just as the arrival of the new Jerusalem is pictured using vertical distance. The spatial and temporal terms in Revelation need to be considered theologically as part of the apocalyptic discourse before too quickly literalising them in ways not done with other objects.

³⁷ See Appendix 5 for further thoughts on the millennium.

Discovery

Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

In what ways does the marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 19:6–8 encourage thankful worship and adoration of God?

In what ways do the testimony of Jesus and the spirit of prophecy reveal the love of God and provide reasons for true worship?

Consider what it means to be in a community with/of 'priests of God and of Christ' (cf. Revelation 1:6, 5:10)?³⁸ In this context review other references to 'blessed' (Revelation 1:3, 5:12, 7:12, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 22:7, 22:14) and 'holy' (3:7, 4:8, 6:10, 11:2, 14:10, 15:4, 16:5, 21:2, 10, 22:11, 19).

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

Reflect on the encouragement provided to those who are suffering persecution or other crises by knowing the rider 'called Faithful and True' and named 'the Word of God' and 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Revelation 19:11–16)?

What comfort is there in knowing that evil powers are seen in this section to have limited scope under God's sovereignty?

The location of the thrones mentioned in Revelation 20:4 is not given. Add related contexts to this passage by looking up references to thrones and their location in Revelation. If those on the thrones are those 'who share in the first resurrection', what attitude will they bring to justice (Revelation 20:6)? What judgement can be expected to have been made about those seated with authority to judge, given their new responsibility?

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

Identify the promises in this section and the reasons for hope that they contain.

Explore ways in which the victory of God is shown to be final and unequivocal, especially when compared with the defeat of evil powers. In what ways can this reframing of human history and circumstances give confidence and assurance in times of difficulty and uncertainty?

Reflection

The millennium is a common lens through which the book of Revelation is viewed. Yet John does not make it his central theme. His framework in the first part of chapter one informs everything that follows. He returns to this context at the end of his book in again mentioning the churches, the Spirit, and the coming of the

³⁸ cf. Revelation 20:4 and 5 regarding those who have been 'beheaded for their testimony to Jesus, and for the word of God'. While not all believers are beheaded, they all testify to Jesus 'and for the word of God'.

Lord Jesus. The last sentence confirms that his book is about the grace of the Lord Jesus, about 'him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father' (Revelation 1:5, 6). It is the doxological life that flows from this experience that is front and centre to everything John mentions. His symphony is of spiritual phenomena, of the way they develop and the sequences that they follow. It is about their impact on people and creation, and the way in which the Lamb of God removes sin and defeats evil. Speculation can never glimpse beyond life's nuances which we experience in our transient and brief lives. The book of Revelation, as has been suggested, is in many ways a Wisdom book in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible.

Millennialism or Chiliasm in its main categories assumes a literalising and actualising of time that may not be at the heart of its apocalyptic meaning.³⁹ Perhaps it helps to think of time as a God-given phenomenon which calibrates our life-journeys, while knowing that God is timeless and 'sees' time from eternity. Heaven-time is 'forever and ever' (Revelation 1:6, 18, 4:9, 10, 5:13, 7:12, 10:6, 11:15, 15:7; cf. 14:11, 19:3 and 22:5), while earth-time awaits the ultimate transition testified to in the Church's primary Creeds.⁴⁰ It is worthwhile studying the temporal terms used in Revelation, and the meaning they bring to the visions and scenes described.⁴¹ Along with a survey of spatial terms, these explorations inform us about John's understanding of who God is and of John's pastoral concern for his companion Christians.

However valid or invalid different millennial understandings may be, thinking of Revelation 20:1ff in pastoral and phenomenological terms helps us recognise that

³⁹ Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation*, 234, indicates that no-one before John speaks of a thousand-year Messianic reign. Jews who thought of history in seven millennial phases apparently did not think of a Messianic phase in this context. Christian theologians who think in terms of actual time fall into three groups: pre-millennial, post-millennial and a-millennial, with a variety of alternatives within these categories. It is not the aim of these brief studies to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of these options. My purpose is to look at what might be common to any literalising of space and time, and to focus on the phenomena of time and space before attempting to describe ways in which they may be actualised in history. My caution comes from reading alternative views, and from concerns about being side-tracked from the gospel of grace, from the immediacy of the message of the Apocalypse and the need for wisdom for our own lives, and for faithfulness to Christ Jesus as Lord of history and as Lamb of God.

⁴⁰ The Apostles' Creed affirms that 'On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead'. The Nicene Creed declares that 'On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. ... We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen'.

⁴¹ Some of the main temporal terms are day, hour, time, no more, again, forever and ever. Numbers used include one (singular), two, three, four, five, six, seven, ten, 12, 666, one thousand, twelve thousand, 144, 000, and time spans including 1260 days and a time, times and half a time.

after what may appear to us to be long, rich times and seasons – even a ‘millennium’ – of Christ’s Lordship with Satan ‘imprisoned’, that somehow, unresolved issues can still re-emerge. There is much here that encourages humility, patience and caution, as we may be all too easily caught in a *millennial trap* by our own blindness and barrenness. Reading these verses highlights the patient persistence of God towards his creation and his humanity, and personally with each of us. The pastoral *millennial alert* is urgent; millennial debates may side-track us from the warnings that saturate this book, and especially of the cautions in this final, visionary parable.

The main theme of this section is the ultimate victory of God and its impact on heaven and earth, and so on redeemed humanity. It is hard to overstate the significance of God’s home being among humanity, of God having abolished death and the misery and grief associated with it. The freshness, vitality and abundance of this new fullness is assured, and provides permanent sustenance to those who are awaiting their final inheritance. God’s people may not feel like conquerors, and may not seem to be winning, but ‘the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end’ is giving ‘water as a gift from the spring of the water of life’ and nourishment from the fruit of the ‘tree of life’ now, and into eternity (Revelation 21:1–8, cf. 2:7, 7:13–17, 22:1ff, 22:14–19).

The rejoicing of Revelation 18:20 and 19:1ff is not vindictive but vindicating. The voice calling for God to be praised evokes a responding ‘voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals’ which glorifies God, his reign, and his accomplishments (Revelation 21:1–8). God’s judgements involve more than the demise of evil; they are his delight in renewing and restoring, in completing the deliverance emphasised in Revelation 1:5. It is the finality of this Exodus that is detailed in Revelation 19:11 to 20:15. The holy city, the New Jerusalem points to the ultimate Promised Land, the new and renewed Eden, the Paradise promised at Calvary, and the new heavens and the new earth outlined in chapters 21 and 22. The motivation for eternal participation in this new world calls for courage, faithfulness, purity, trust, true worship, honesty, and for a genuine delight in life by relating to all people with decency and dignity (cf. Revelation 21:7, 8).

Next time

What can we learn about managing life’s difficulties and delights from the promise of ‘the holy city Jerusalem coming down [to earth] out of heaven from God’ (Revelation 21:9)? What is the significance of ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb’ being in the new Jerusalem?

Unveiling eternity; victory here and now – 2

Revelation 21:9–22:19

Introduction

The message of the ‘loud voice from the throne’ in Revelation 21:3, 4 builds on the ‘voice of a great multitude’ in Revelation 19:6–8. As in Revelation 7:9–17, the focus is not primarily on judgement, but on recovery, restoration and renewal. The marriage announced in chapter 19 is about a holy city which descends from heaven and is sent from God (Revelation 21:2, 10). The seven final revelations explore this ultimate reality. In the first revelation, the city-bride has divine glory and a precious radiance. Its architecture and infrastructure are consistent with this radiant glory, and with the personal and relational qualities that are perverted and polluted by those facing the second death.

The second revelation revisits the theme of divine presence (Revelation 21:3–6), indicating that the city is no mere replica of Israel’s tabernacle tent or the Jerusalem temples. God’s presence with his people lights the city and embraces and enables its worship. Its radiance is such that ‘nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. ... People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations.’ (Revelation 21:24, 26). The contrast with the harlot-city is clear. Sinister, capricious darkness is banished for ever. There is no need to shut gates or have defences. The Exodus that is climaxed by those who bring treasures to this city as its permanent citizens make the city eternally repugnant to those who reject the eternal gospel of the God of grace and mercy (cf. Revelation 14:6, 7).

In the third revelation, the city-temple-bride is eternally nurtured and nourished by the water of life and the tree of life. The leaves of the tree ‘are for the healing of the nations’ (Revelation 22:1ff), confirming the recovery and renewal described in verse four. Perhaps this healing is already flowing into history. Perhaps eternal realities are present to us continually, but in the frailty of life with its failures and mortality, we only see glimpses of this glorious Paradise. The Gospel of John declares Jesus as the world’s true light, a theme further emphasised in 1 John 1, and further highlighted in these last visions. The fourth revelation replays Revelation 19:9, 10, reminding us that not only do we need the Lord God as our light, not only do we need his love and life liberating us from terror and tyranny, but that even when the light shines, we still struggle to understand it (cf. John 1:1–18).

The last group of three revelations remind us of the immediacy nominated in verse 10. Choices about holiness and righteousness issue in actions and deeds, but have their origin in being orientated to the grace of God in Christ (Revelation 22:11–15). Just as the eternal city has open gates, so its God has an open invitation, shared by those already its joyful beneficiaries (Revelation 22:16, 17). The final

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revelation turns the thoughtful reader to the first three verses of Revelation chapter one where John had emphasised the source and significance of this Apocalypse (Revelation 22:18, 19). This last warning reminds us of pressing and urgent business. This book is relevant now, it is about the gospel, it is about Jesus, and it offers wisdom and hope to a weary world. This book-end with the start of chapter one is confirmed again by the testimony given by the risen Christ, and the affirmation of God's people by the Holy Spirit. Grace, indeed, flows like a river and barren deserts flourish into fruitfulness forever and ever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Discovery

Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Reflect on these last seven revelations to understand ways in which worship is being encouraged, and some of the reasons behind the encouragements.

Review and summarise your responses to earlier Discovery sections on *Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...* and reflect on ways in which your thankfulness for God's love has been enriched by studying the book of Revelation.

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

Reflect on these last seven revelations to identify ways in which trust is being encouraged, and some of the reasons behind the encouragements.

Review and summarise your responses to earlier Discovery sections on *Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph...* and reflect on ways in which your understanding of God's plan to achieve his purpose have been helped by studying the book of Revelation.

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

Reflect on these last seven revelations to explore ways in which hope is being encouraged, and some of the reasons behind the encouragements.

Review and summarise your responses to earlier Discovery sections on *Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...* and reflect on ways in which your awareness of God's promises has been increased by studying the book of Revelation.

Reflection

The dramatic descriptions of the demise and destruction of evil can side-track us from the central narrative of the grace and mercy of God. Whereas the emphasis in the Gospel of John is on the person of Jesus and his death and resurrection, this Apocalypse does not shield readers from the horror of evil by accounts of the human life of a Saviour. Neither does it protect us by considering the community life discussed in the Johannine epistles. If we do not push the tragic realities

depicted in Revelation into some remote future or back into analyses of the past, then the immediacy of what is written greatly impacts our present lives.

If the opening of the seven seals, the sounding of the seven trumpets, the pouring out of the bowls, and other events described throughout this book have as their frame of reference reactions by human and spiritual powers to heavenly goodness and generosity, then the richness of heavenly visions in chapters 4, 7, 12, 14 and 19ff is of even greater significance. The destruction of evil is not a case of God being harsh in order to be kind, but results from seeing God's pure kindness as repulsive, feeble and ineffective.

Likewise, we are not presented with God, having formerly preached love, having come into the world in Jesus as love, having offered mercy and grace, having shown compassion and consideration, now finally acting with justice, wrath and punishment. God's judgement is that evil has no part in his own being, in his own plans and purposes, and in his origin of and destiny for humanity and creation. This divine disposition is not some remote, harsh, severe, stoic silence. It is the action of incarnate, sacrificial love that shows God's being in inexplicable and inexpressible glory.⁴² It is the personal presence of divine love, holiness, righteousness, truth and goodness in God's mercy and grace, flowing forever as living water, bearing fruit in every season from trees of life. It is God himself who purges nations and peoples of wickedness and evil, and unmask and destroys evil spirituality. The death of Christ is the judgement of the world because it is its liberation. It releases us from captivity and sets us on our Exodus to the New Jerusalem where we inherit life in a new earth and a new heaven. God does not change character in the Apocalypse; we there see what his grace and mercy, and the peace, joy and hope they offer and bring, look like when framed within the world of darkness and defiance. Finally, thankfully, the sights of eternity shine brightly and call us home to the place where God dwells with humanity, where temples are gone because the divine presence surrounds us, secures us and sanctifies us for ever.

We see these truths in a hymn, apparently wrongly attributed to John Calvin:⁴³

⁴² The Nicene Creed has 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end'.

⁴³ John Calvin, attributed; translated by Smith, Elizabeth L., '625. We Greet You, Sure Redeemer from All Strife,' <http://hymnary.org/hymn/WSH1972/625>.

See John Roxborough, 'Did John Calvin Write the Hymn "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art"?', <http://roxborough.com/REFORMED/calvinhymn.htm> for comments on the authorship of this hymn.

My music for 'We greet you, sure Redeemer from all strife': *New Creation Hymn Book*, (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, <https://www.newcreationlibrary.org.au>, 2010), 333.

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We greet you, sure Redeemer from all strife,
Our only trust and Saviour of our life,
Who pain did undergo for our poor sake;
We pray you from our hearts all cares to take.

You are the King of mercy and of grace,
Reigning omnipotent in every place:
So come, O King, and our whole being sway;
Shine on us with the light of your pure day.

You are the life, in which we do believe,
From you all substance and all strength receive;
Sustain us by your faith and by your power,
And give us strength in every trying hour.

You have the true and perfect gentleness;
You have no harshness and no bitterness:
O grant to us the grace in you we see
That we may dwell in perfect unity.

Our hope is in no other save in you;
Our faith is built upon your promise true;
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
That in your strength we evermore endure.

Gerhard Tersteegen, writing about the parable of the lost son and the forgiving father, shares a similar perspective: ⁴⁴

‘The Home’, Luke 15:23, 24

Thou who givest of thy gladness till the cup runs o’er –
Cup whereof the pilgrim weary drinks to thirst no more –
Not a-nigh me, but within me is thy joy divine;
Thou, O Lord, hast made thy dwelling in this heart of mine.

Need I that a law should bind me captive unto thee?
Captive in my heart, rejoicing never to be free.
Ever with me, glorious, awful, tender, passing sweet,
One upon whose heart I rest me, worship at his feet.

⁴⁴ Gerhard Tersteegen, ‘The Home,’ <https://hymnophile.wordpress.com/category/gerhard-tersteegen-1697-1769/>.

My music for ‘Thou who givest of thy gladness’: *New Creation Hymn Book*, 368.

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With me, whereso'er I wander that great presence goes,
That unutterable gladness, undisturbed repose.
Everywhere the blessed stillness of his holy place –
Stillness of the love that worships dumb before his face.

To thy house, O God my Father, thy lost child is come;
Led by wandering lights no longer, I have found my home.
Over moor and fen I tracked them through the midnight blast,
But to find the light eternal in my heart at last.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these thoughts are consistent with Psalm 23!⁴⁵

Next time

Jesus has testified to the church as 'the bright morning star' (Revelation 22:16, cf. 2:28). His witness is the essence of prophecy, given by the Spirit in whom and from whom all prophecy is known. In what ways are we to understand the affirmation and request of the 'Spirit and the bride' and all who hear them and join with them? What does the 'one who testifies to these things' mean when he declares, 'Surely I am coming soon' (Revelation 22:16–20)?

⁴⁵ My music for Psalm 23: *New Creation Hymn Book*, 28(ii).

A personal promise for tomorrow

Revelation 1 and 22

Introduction

In what ways are we to understand the references to Christ's further coming? Although the relevant references are mainly in the first and last chapters, and mostly early in the first and late in the last, they provide a clear focus about the author's thinking.

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4).

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail (Revelation 1:7).

'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty (Revelation 1:8).

'See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame' (Revelation 16:15).

'See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book' (Revelation 22:7).

'See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end' (Revelation 22:12, 13).

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

The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:20).

Are we to understand present or future meaning, or both? Is the world of the first churches, and ours today, one to which Christ comes? Is he present now by his Spirit? If Jesus comes now, then in what ways are we, by faith, to know him as we await his final appearance?

Given this perspective, the Apocalypse of John has relevance for those facing martyrdom and marginalisation, exclusion and persecution. Jews in the seven churches knew of their ancestors' slavery in Egypt and the Exodus. They were aware of the Assyrian and Babylonian exile, and of the very limited recovery and restoration that followed. They knew of the Greek and Roman invasions, and that the Gospel had its context in Jesus' ministry and crucifixion.

Living in Love and Freedom

Does the book of Revelation provide hope for a renewal not involving vengeance and victimisation, but care for the oppressed and outcast? What can we learn from a victory achieved in defeat, a glory gained by suffering, and the removal of evil by a slain Lamb?

In giving wisdom for godly living, and in sharing good news of salvation in Jesus, John provides meaning and purpose of life in a world wracked by evil. His intention is for people to engage, participate and live in this world. His Apocalypse is not about abandoning the world but about rejecting the use of coercion, exclusion, domination and repression by human empires and systems. He is against idolatry, false worship and self-glorification and for treating oneself and others with dignity, decency and honour. Christ's presence is about knowing something of his peace, joy and hope in times of terror, trauma and adversity.

Discovery

In further reviewing your reading and studying Revelation, identify and summarise some main thoughts about Christ's coming that have been helpful. You may find the themes used in these Discovery sections suggest verses from other passages of Scripture, such as those mentioned here:

Knowing God's love and worshipping God with thanks ...

Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth (Psalm 46:10).

Trusting God in times of trouble, trial, torment, tragedy and triumph ...

In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness (Psalm 31:1).

Living in hope of God's promised fullness for his people ...

I am the LORD who heals you (Exodus 15:26).

Reflection

To use the weapons of the world-system described in Revelation only perpetuates and reinvents the tragedy of sin and evil. To bring the grace and mercy of the gospel creates new possibilities of freedom, love and life that expose the worthlessness of abuse and exploitation to the wonders of forgiveness and reconciliation. The following prayers are one expression of a longing to live in hope, peace and joy.

Prayers

Thankfulness for Jesus Christ as Lamb of God and liberator

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being the Lamb of God who removes the world's evil and conquers death.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you love us and liberate us from the tyranny of our failures by your shed blood.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, that you create a community from every nation and language group to worship and serve your heavenly Father by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Thankfulness for God's constancy and presence

Thank you, heavenly Father, for the ways in which you are working through Jesus Christ in the immediacy of our everyday situations.

Thank you, heavenly Father, that Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse is the same Saviour and Lord of whom we read in the Gospels and Epistles.

Thank you, heavenly Father, that your Holy Spirit is with us to confirm the testimony of Jesus about your purposes and plan.

Thankfulness for good news of divine love, mercy and hope

Thank you, heavenly Father, that the Apocalypse brings good news of your plan to rid your creation of sin, evil, suffering and pain by your love.

Thank you, heavenly Father, that your good news tells us about your intention to restore, reshape and renew our troubled and broken world.

Thank you, heavenly Father, for your good news which reaches out to the marginalised, the excluded and the vulnerable, and brings your liberated people together into a diverse and unified holy community.

Thankfulness for gifts of wisdom, compassion and expectation

Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you come to us to reveal the wisdom we need amid the joys and sorrows of our lives.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you speak the words of Christ to the churches in local places throughout the world in every generation.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you direct us to and bring us into the gifts God has promised now and in eternity in and through the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Requests for calmness, courage and fulfilment

We pray for calmness in the struggles we face in the knowledge that you are God, that you are always faithful and good, and that you conquer spiritual evil and wickedness through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

We pray for the courage to trust you to break the cycles of domination and exclusion that affect humanity because of race, economics, social position, gender and sectarianism.

We pray that people in every community will know the healing and saving power of your love and mercy, and that your purposes will be realised on earth as they are in heaven.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Section outlines

The eight sections below are based on Michael Wilcock's *The Message of Revelation*, pages 15–20 and 110–115. His sections are grouped into four pairs and some of his headings have been changed.

Understanding the present; anticipating the future

Revelation 1:9–8:1

Understanding the present; anticipating the future – 1.1

Revelation 1:9–3:22

Christ: Prophet, Priest and King 1:9–20

Seven letters 2:1–3:22

Letter 1: to Ephesus 2:1–7

Letter 2: to Smyrna 2:8–11

Letter 3: to Pergamum 2:12–17

Letter 4: to Thyatira 2:18–29

Letter 5: to Sardis 3:1–6

Letter 6: to Philadelphia 3:7–13

Letter 7: to Laodicea 3:14–22

Understanding the present; anticipating the future – 1.2

Revelation 4:1–8:1

Ceaseless worship 4:1–5:14

One enthroned; seven spirits of God 4:1–11

Lion-Lamb 5:1–5:14

Seals 1–4 On earth 6:1–8

Seal 1: national conquest 6:1, 2

Seal 2: civil strife 6:3, 4

Seal 3: famine 6:5, 6

Seal 4: death 6:7, 8

Seals 5–7 A great multitude 6:9–8:1

Seal 5: Suffering martyrs 6:9–11

Seal 6: The wrath of the Lamb 6:12–17

The people of God 7:1–17

Tribes of Israel 7:1–8

Every nation 7:9–17

Seal 7: Sacred silence 8:1

Overcoming the world system

Revelation 8:2–15:4

Overcoming the world system – 2.1

Revelation 8:2–11:18

Answered prayers 8:2–8:5

Trumpets 1–4 On earth 8:6–13

Trumpet 1: ecological disaster 8:7

Trumpet 2: trade difficulties 8:8, 9

Trumpet 3: pollution 8:10, 11

Trumpet 4: cosmic disruption 8:12

Warning: three woes 8:13

Trumpets 5–7 The mystery of God 9:1–11:18

Trumpet 5, Woe 1: Evil torture and unbelief 9:1–12

Trumpet 6, Woe 2: Plagues, death and defiance 9:13–21

Seven thunders; the mystery of God 10:1–7

More prophecy; one temple; two witnesses 10:8–11:14

Trumpet 7, Woe 3: Messiah is victorious 11:15–18

Overcoming the world system – 2.2

Revelation 11:19–15:4

Covenant-Conqueror 12:1–17

Woman and Son 12:1–6

Accusation and testimony 12:7–12

Battle of the faithful family 12:13–17

Visions 1–4 Calls for endurance, faith and wisdom 13:1–14:13

Vision 1: Call for endurance and faith 13:1–10

Vision 2: Forced, false worship 13:11–18

Vision 3: True, triumphant worship 14:1–5

Vision 4: An eternal gospel 14:6–13

Visions 5–7 From plagues to promise

Vision 5: One like the Son of Man 14:14–20

Vision 6: Seven plagues; last wrath of God 15:1

Vision 7: Exodus anthem: Song of Moses and the Lamb 15:2–4

Defeating evil spiritual powers

Revelation 15:5–19:10

Defeating evil spiritual powers – 3.1

Revelation 15:5–16:21

Temple opened 15:5–16:1

Song of Moses and the Lamb 15:2–4

Temple of the tent of witness in heaven opened 15:3–16:1

Bowls 1–4 False worship

Bowl 1: Earth 16:2

Bowl 2: Sea 16:3

Bowl 3: Rivers 16:4–7

Bowl 4: Sky 16:8, 9

Bowls 5–7 Persistent evil

Bowl 5: Torment 16:10, 11

Bowl 6: Shame 16:12–16

Bowl 7: Defeat 16:17–21

Defeating evil spiritual powers – 3.2

Revelation 17:1–19:10

Words 1–4 Babylon the abominable

Word 1: Defeat of Babylon 17:1–6

Word 2: Mystery of Babylon 17:7–18

Word 3: Collapse of Babylon 18:1–3

Word 4: Babylon the widow 18:4–20

Words 5–7 A great, heavenly multitude

Word 5: Victory joy 18:20–24

Word 6: Salvation, glory and power 19:1–5

Word 7: The marriage of the Lamb has come 19:6–8

True worship, testimony and prophecy 19:9, 10

Unveiling eternity; victory in the here and now

Revelation 19:1–22:19

Unveiling eternity; victory in the here and now – 4.1

Revelation 19:11–21:8

Visions 1–4 The victory of God 19:11–20:3

Vision 1: King of kings and Lord of lords 19:11–16

Vision 2: Victory over rulers 19:17, 18

Vision 3: Victory over idolatry and false worship 19:19–21

Vision 4: Victory over evil powers 20:1–3

Visions 5–7 All things new 20:4–21:8

Vision 5: First resurrection 20:4–10

Vision 6: The book of life 20:11–15

Vision 7: New heaven, new earth, holy city 21:1–8

Unveiling eternity; victory in the here and now – 4.2

Revelation 21:9–22:19

The bride, the wife of the Lamb revealed 21:9

Final Revelations 1–4 The holy city 21:10–22:10

Final Revelation 1: God's city 21:10–21

Final Revelation 2: God's dwelling 21:22–27

Final Revelation 3: God's world renewed 22:1–5

Final Revelation 4: God's word validated 22:6–10

Final Revelations 5–7 I am coming soon 22:11–19

Final Revelation 5: God's work completed 22:11–15

Final Revelation 6: God's final blessing 22:16, 17

Final Revelation 7: God's final warning 22:18, 19

Amen! 22:20, 21

Appendix 2: Apocalyptic alternatives

If the primary divine qualities are those that describe who God essentially is, then God is love, God is light, God is good, God is true (faithful, steadfast), God is righteous and God is holy readily come to mind. God's mercy and grace are his love, goodness, truth, righteousness and holiness in action. Similarly, God *is* gracious and merciful, and his grace and mercy come to us in his actions of love, goodness, truth, righteousness and holiness.

This flow of God's grace and mercy brings a rich harvest to humanity and creation. Peace and constructive relationships thrive. Joy, love and humility prosper, as do patience, faithfulness and honour. People are treated with dignity and decency, and respect is shown for their diversity. Relationships and behaviours feature self-control and gentleness, as well as humility, kindness, generosity and empathy.

This approach captures a brief snapshot of the way God can be understood to act in the book of Revelation. God does not use methods and strategies inconsistent with his own nature. Three quotes from a general social context follow. They are among the voices of many millions, including those who have suffered and others who continue to suffer oppression, tyranny and evil:

'If I have seen further, it is by standing on [the] shoulders of giants'.⁴⁶

'In war: resolution; in defeat: defiance; in victory: magnanimity; in peace: goodwill'.⁴⁷

'we explain [to our daughters] that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high'.⁴⁸

The tragic alternative to a movement from God's essential being to a flourishing humanity living in a vibrant and fruitful creation is one in which human actions and spiritual powers are driven by hate, wickedness, falsehood, deceit, corruption and defilement. These and similar intentions impact on others in predatory ways as cruelty, brutality, abuse, severity and harshness. They leave destructive trails of strife, bitterness, arrogance, anger, hostility, violence, greed and jealousy.

In contrast to the quotes above, the actions of those using power in these ways might be described as follows:

⁴⁶ Sir Isaac Newton, *Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke* (http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/9285, 1675).

⁴⁷ Sir Winston Churchill, *The Second World War. Volume I : The Gathering Storm* (1951) 'Moral of the Work'.

⁴⁸ Michelle Obama, '2016 Democratic Convention,' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZNWYqDU948>, -2:45.

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‘To get further up, trample others into the ground’

‘In victory vengeance, in defeat malice’

Human society and each of us as persons are complex. We are caught in the tension of a deep spiritual battle, both within us and around us. The book of Revelation proclaims that only one approach is ultimately sustainable, and that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, is the ‘first and the last, and the living one’ who was dead and is ‘alive forever and ever’ and holds ‘the keys of Death and Hades’ (Revelation 1:17–19). No wonder we are told that ‘on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail’ (Revelation 1:7).

Appendix 3: The harlot and the bride

Two scenarios are presented towards the end of the book of Revelation. One is of the harlot and another presents the Lamb's bride. The harlot is mentioned prior to the message that the 'marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready' (Revelation 19:7). These two alternatives may be reminders of the forbidden woman and the wisdom woman of Proverbs 1 to 9.⁴⁹ In reflecting on these scenarios it is important to ask whether the patriarchal contexts are part of, and essential to, the gospel message, and to what extent seemingly culturally aligned sexualised interpretations and gender perspectives regarding various passages are appropriate. Perhaps the book of Revelation highlights reasons for re-examining the ways violence and discrimination against women, and social issues involving race and class, are represented in the Bible.

The false teacher in the church at Thyatira is called 'that woman Jezebel' whose adulterous teaching is described as Satanic (Revelation 2:20).

Revelation 7:1ff mentions 144,000 slaves 'having the seal of the living God', and their being equally apportioned to Israelite tribes. In chapter 14:1ff the Lamb has the same number of followers, with 'his name and his Father's name written on their forehead'. They form a male voice choir, singing a 'new song', which women are not mentioned as learning. The 144,000 are male 'virgins' who have 'not defined themselves with women', and seem to be an army under the Lamb (cf. Revelation 12:1ff).

In Revelation 12:1 the mother of the male-son is 'a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars'. The wilderness is a place of protection and the earth helps the woman, although her destiny is not given.

Revelation 14:6ff introduces Babylon as a female fornicator. Babylon the great is a title of self-glorification, of recognition of impact, but also of irony. In chapters 17 and 18, nations have drunk 'the wine of her fornication', kings are said to fornicate with her, while merchants have indulged themselves of her luxury. God's people are told not to be involved in 'her sins' or drink from 'the cup she has mixed', and so avoid 'her plagues'. Her self-glorification causes immense grief and distress to other people. The judgement that comes to her is vast. Her 'dainties' and 'splendour' disappear for ever. Her clothing and jewellery are 'laid waste' in a single hour. Her culture is devastated, music is silenced, lights are extinguished, marriages cease, and 'the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth' is exposed for all to see. She is a female queen whose destruction is by simultaneous predatory male action. The locusts which emerge

⁴⁹ See my *Learning to Love Wisdom: Educational, Social and Theological Themes in Proverbs 1 to 9*.

from the bottomless pit have ‘hair like women’s hair’ (Revelation 9:8), with the pit mentioned again in Revelation 9:11, 11:7, 17:8 and 20:1, 3.

The bride of the Lamb, the holy city, the new Jerusalem comes ‘down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (Revelation 19:7, 21:1–22, 22:17). Her preparation for marriage is very different to the militancy of Faithful and True, who rides out on the white horse to ‘strike down the nations’ with a ‘sharp sword’ coming out of his mouth, and then ‘rule[s] them with a rod of iron’, treading ‘the wine-press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty’. The “bride has made herself ready; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure” – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints’. She contrasts with the gaudy prostitute who is quoted asserting her apparent invincibility, while the bride’s only message is her call with the Spirit for Christ to come (Revelation 18:7, 22:17). Similarly, the wedding supper in Revelation 19:9 is very different to the ‘great supper of God’ in Revelation 19:17.

The mentions of the water and the tree of life are reminders of the second Genesis account and so have links to the creation narrative about the first man and woman (Revelation 2:7, 22:2, 14, 19).

The book of Revelation has men in leading roles, and a bride inviting her bridegroom to come for her. It takes little thought to identify some of the ways in which these passages might be applied to endorse or reject various approaches to gender and sexuality.⁵⁰ It is vital that attempts to interpret these passages are consistent with the Biblical message of salvation, without necessarily agreeing with the cultural contexts used in describing gospel truth. It is perhaps even more urgent that consideration is given to those reading this book whose experience of domination has included unwelcome and inappropriate behaviour, including where men have exploited privileged roles over women.

⁵⁰ cf. Jacqueline Lapsley, Carol Newsom, and Sharon Ringe, eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary, Third Edition* (Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

Appendix 4: Metaphor and mystery in triumph and trauma

There is extensive use of metaphor in Revelation. Parables and apocalyptic narrative have much in common. Jesus described God's kingdom as being easily missed (e.g. Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). Paul mentions the 'revelation of the mystery', the 'mystery of God', 'speaking mysteries in the Spirit', 'the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ', 'the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things', 'the mystery of the gospel', 'the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you', 'the knowledge of God's mystery' and 'the mystery of Christ' (Romans 11:25, 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:1, 4:1, 13:2, 14:2, 15:51; Ephesians 1:9, 3:3–9, 6:19, Colossians 1:26, 27, 2:2, 4:3). Marriage is a 'great mystery' linking Christ and the church, while 'the mystery of lawlessness' opposes God's plan and purposes (Ephesians 5:32; 2 Thessalonians 2:7). Timothy is urged to 'hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience', since 'the mystery of our religion is great: 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 3:9, 16).

While these passages are not from Johannine writings, they provide a context for the references to mystery in Revelation. There we read of 'the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in [Christ's] right hand' (Revelation 1:20). The seventh trumpet confirms prophetic declarations by fulfilling 'the mystery of God' (Revelation 10:7). In Revelation 17, Babylon's name is called a mystery about which John should not be 'amazed' (Revelation 17:5–7). Understanding mysteries, like Gospel parables, needs revelation regarding the gospel. Merely rationalising them may lead to false conclusions. The sayings 'Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced' and 'Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived' express something about the Biblical views of mystery.⁵¹

Many events in Revelation 17 and 18 are unpleasant and traumatic.⁵² Those who have endured hostile and predatory behaviours may find difficulty in the ways Babylon's demise is described, and the Lamb and the bride's relationship is expressed. Applying language about God's own relationships directly to human relationships can lead to outcomes not sustained by the main gospel narrative. Apocalyptic and parabolic language may be written from a cultural context and in a historical setting not always aligned with the truths being proclaimed. Issues concerning metaphor and mystery may unintentionally mask the message, or they might enhance its meaning. The same words in different circumstances can result in opposite outcomes. Thoughtful sensitivity is needed when presumably obvious

⁵¹ Attributed to Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel respectively.

⁵² cf. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds., *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta, USA: SBL Press, 2016).

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meanings carry biases to which a speaker or writer may be oblivious, and which compromise the originally intended messages.

Expressing thoughts through various art forms can be part of a healing journey, including where trauma and tragedy may have seemed to equal if not eclipse triumph. Hearing the voices of those impacted by the kinds of events described in Revelation is important if Christian communities are to grow and mature. In this way lament and thanksgiving can both be accepted parts of living together as God's people.

Appendix 5: The millennium: mystery and parable

If the book of Revelation is profiling evil's destructive responses to grace's constructive initiatives, then the millennium account may be the book's ultimate withering critique of the ubiquity of concupiscence in a creation freely gifted to humanity and all creatures as a realm for love, kindness, generosity and prosperous community.⁵³ Rather than using the millennium to analyse the history of the church age, or to speculate about an unknown final consummation, it may be preferable to see it as reinforcing the messages of 'the seven spirits who are before [God's] throne' to 'anyone who has an ear' in the seven churches (Revelation 1:4, 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22).⁵⁴

After the parable of the sower, Matthew records Jesus explaining that the 'reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand"' (Matthew 13:13). In the same way as parables describe real, everyday responses to the gospel, so the millennium account is no less real when seen as parabolic mystery. Just as the parable of the sower can be understood as commentary about phases of our lives as much as providing descriptions of fixed positions,⁵⁵ so, perhaps the stubbornness described in the millennium account may encourage us to step back from opposing God's mercy and grace. If John 1:10–13 is relevant to John of Patmos' apocalyptic discourse, then the immediacy of the millennium account to our everyday responses, and to the actions of others, in the context of God's love is more obvious. Understanding it this way may even help temper some of the harsh views that so easily seem to infect interpretations of the book of Revelation.

While the book of Revelation describes God as one 'who was and who is and who is to come', much of the Apocalypse is about the God 'who is', the now-God, present and active in creation, working with created resources to achieve his restorative purposes (Revelation 1:4, 8, 4:8). The millennium account is, in this sense, about today and every day, in literal and actual terms. It is personal to all humanity, especially when caught in cycles of negative implosion whereby divine revelation is desecrated and humanity is demeaned and denigrated. The tragedy of scapegoating is not simply about humanity in the abstract, but all too often includes those nearest to us, and even ourselves.⁵⁶

⁵³ cf. Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2010).

⁵⁴ cf. Geoffrey Bingham, *Revelation of St John the Divine, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1993).

⁵⁵ Jonathan Fontanarosa, *Soils Ain't Soils* (Adelaide: Edge Church podcast, 2011).

⁵⁶ cf. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001).

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The description of the failure of millennial resistance to grace comes before passages indicating that the world does not end with a whimper or a bang,⁵⁷ but by being transformed into a new creation. Humanity, however hollowed out by the horrors of evil, is eternally substantial, and destined for a full participation in the life of a new heavens and a new earth.⁵⁸ Qoheleth's optimism can encourage us all: Our Creator is worth remembering; bread cast out on waters will return. The poor man who was forgotten, having saved the city,⁵⁹ will be remembered as a king who conquered by becoming a slain lamb. This is the true telos, the great goal of grace, the sure hope for all humanity.

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men,' <https://msu.edu/~jungahre/transmedia/the-hollow-men.html>.

⁵⁸ cf. C. S. Lewis, *Great Divorce, The* (Glasgow, UK: Fount Paperbacks, 1983).

⁵⁹ Ecclesiastes 9:15, 16, 11:1, 12:1.

Living Treasures

These ‘Living Treasures’ are listed in the order they were originally presented. This table lists them by their theme texts.

Title	Theme text	Page
Afraid of God	Genesis 3:1–24	175
Times of trouble and triumph	Psalms 23	167
God’s forever love	Psalms 136	140
Family matters	Proverbs 3:1–12, 4:1–9	155
Seedtime and harvest	Mark 4:26–34	143
More than enough for everyone	Mark 8:1–9	147
Your King comes to you	Mark 11:1–11	152
Untouchable: healing humanity	Luke 5:12–16	169
Your visitation from God	Luke 19:28–48	178
Healing for life	John 4:43–5:15	161
God’s promise rests on grace	Romans 4	126
The Lord is generous to all who call on him	Romans 9:31–10:21	130
God’s promise and Abraham’s faith	Galatians 3:1–22	164
Even death on a cross	Philippians 2:1–11	172
Seven promises for the people of God	Revelation 1:9–20	136

God's promise rests on grace

Romans 4

Introduction

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome that the gospel is for all nations and locations, and not simply for Jews (Romans 1:5, 13, 16, 3:29, 9:17, 10:12, 18, 11:11–13, 15:5–29, 15:18–29, 16:25–27). Rome, with its military, political and cultural influence, was therefore a strategic destination for Paul (Acts 19:21, 23:11; Romans 1:14, 15).

Paul's letter is in several sections: in chapters 1 to 3 he states his message, in chapters 5 to 11 he develops significant themes, and in chapters 12 to 16 his focus is on those to whom he writes. In chapter 4 Paul illustrates his central message using the story of Abraham.

From creation; for all humanity

Abraham trusted God 'who justifies the ungodly', and his faith was recognised as righteousness (Romans 4:5; Genesis 15:6). This change is significant as Abraham's family was worshipping idols when the 'God of glory' appeared to him (Joshua 24:2; cf. Acts 7:2). To be counted as righteous is central to Paul's gospel, especially given his description of ungodliness (Romans 1:16–25).

Paul links Abraham's early rejection of idolatry with David's adultery and murder at the height of his reign. Both their failures are described in the light of God's justification of the ungodly, and his blessing of the sinner with forgiveness and covering: of protection, not covering up (cf. Psalm 32).

In previous chapters Paul contrasted those who knew the law of Moses but would still be judged by it, with those who 'perish apart from the law' (Romans 2:12). Either way there is a fundamental principle embedded in creation, a truth that is evident regardless of their knowledge of the Mosaic law (Romans 1:18–23, 2:14–16).

Paul's mention of blessing in Romans 4:6, 7 is a reminder of the creation narratives, and the covenants with Noah and Abraham (Genesis 1:26–2:25, 5:2, 9:1, 12:1ff). The choice between good and evil is represented by a tree which brings death. Edenic freedom was associated with the tree of life and with living in communion with God. This freedom is life in the Spirit and not the flesh, it is by faith and trust, and not by self-justifying works (cf. Romans 1:16–18, 2:6–11, 2:28, 29, 8:1ff; Galatians 6:7–9).

Paul's focus on Abraham and David highlights their restoration to created dignity and their realisation of creational destiny. God justifies the ungodly idolater and forgives the sinful adulterer. This divine, forensic reckoning does not ignore human failure. It secures a future built not on memory erasure, but on eternal

blessings. The justified and forgiven person is equipped by God to deal with the consequences of past failure and the challenges of future battles.

Inheriting the world

Earlier in the epistle, Paul writes that uncircumcision counts as circumcision for those who are uncircumcised but keep the law and its commandments. He says that uncircumcised men who keep the law are a judgement on those who are circumcised but disobedient. True circumcision is spiritual and of the heart, rather than fleshly and of works (Romans 2:25–29).

In Romans 4:9–15 Paul develops his argument by pointing out that Abraham's justification preceded his circumcision, and that circumcision was a sign of God's gift of righteousness rather than a means to it. This gift of righteousness precedes the sign and the seal, making Abraham the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not (Romans 4:9–12).

The central issue for Paul is the substance of 'the righteousness of faith', not signs or seals, however legitimate they may be. Neither circumcision nor, by implication, any replacement action, are conditions for participation in the Christian community. Abraham did not inherit the world by works of obedience even to divine legislation (Romans 4:13):

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law [of Moses] but [came] through the righteousness of faith.

While the 'but' contrasts grace and works in terms of faith, it also compares grace and law as wonderful gifts. Law is 'the embodiment of knowledge and truth' written into consciences and hearts to enlighten and guide humanity into knowing God's will and determining what is best (Romans 2:14–20).

Paul's message is consistent with his earlier declaration about God's wrath against ungodliness and wickedness (Romans 1:16–32). Where the law is not known, it cannot be explicitly broken, but death still comes because the law is written into creation:

For the law [without faith] brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation [but there is death] (Romans 4:15, cf. Romans 2:1–3:31).

God's covenant with Abraham centred on blessing not only the patriarch and his family, but the nations. It builds on the creational mandate and its renewal with Noah (Genesis 12:1–3, 17:1–21, cf. 1:28, 5:2, 9:1; Hebrews 11:8–19). Abraham and Sarah's fruitfulness would flow from their faith in God, bringing Sarah pain in childbirth and Abraham discomfort through circumcision (Genesis 3:16, 17:1–27; cf. Galatians 4:21–31). While circumcision was only for men, fruitfulness and blessings are for all, male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile (cf. Galatians 3:27–29).

The breadth and depth of God's gift of 'the righteousness of faith' by which Abraham inherits the world is possible only because of God's relationship with humanity from creation (Romans 4:1–8, cf. 1:16, 17). No wonder Paul works so hard to ensure there are no unnecessary barriers – like circumcision – to the gospel going to the nations.

Future hope and sure promises

Verses 13 to 16 and 20 to 22 of chapter four bookend this section with references to faith and promise. Paul does not want his readers locked into the past. He wants them looking to the future with sure hope, a future where God fulfils his promises to those who live by faith as he 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17).

Abraham is the 'father of all of us' not only because of past and present justification, but because of future hope and sure promises (Romans 4:16). God's gift of resurrection and new creational life – in that order – speaks not only of the Genesis creation and flood stories, but of a renewed creation (cf. Romans 8:18–39). In reminding his readers of Adam, Noah, Abraham and David, Paul was urging the Roman Christians to 'rest on [guaranteed] grace' and be abundantly fruitful (Romans 4:16).

It would be easy to assume that Abraham weakened in his faith by having a son with Hagar while Sarah was barren, but whatever the battle they went through at that time, their underlying trust remained, their faith grew and they glorified God. The result was renewed affirmation that his faith – and so his hope – counted as righteousness (Romans 4:19–22). Along with Abraham's spiritual descendants, including those from Ishmael who would believe, God achieves what he promised: the just will live by faith, and those who are puffed up and arrogant will fail (Romans 1:16, 17; cf. Habakkuk 2:4 (NIV)).

The story of Hagar is important. God provided for her and Ishmael, and promised them a fruitful future (Genesis 21:9–21). While Paul's allegory regarding Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:24–31 describes truth about spiritual slavery and freedom, God's promise to Abraham is for all nations. All of Abraham's physical descendants can be his spiritual offspring (Genesis 12:1–3).

Jesus our Lord

Having taken his readers through the story of Abraham, Paul reconnects them with his message in chapters 1 to 3. The reckoning to Abraham is for us, as well as for them. In writing that it is for all who 'believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead', Paul is clear that the God of Abraham is Jesus' God, his God, their God, and ours as well (Romans 4:24; cf. Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8). The promises given to Abraham apply to us; to all Abraham's offspring (cf. Matthew 8:11; Luke 1:55, 73). God is Abraham's heavenly Father, and, through his Son, Jesus Christ is our Lord and his Lord. In the same way that Abraham and David

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both faced up to their failures without covering them up or being dishonest and deceitful, so we too can know God's promises and live in true grace and hope.

Paul finishes the chapter on the same themes he started it. He mirrors his initial statement about God justifying ungodly Abraham and forgiving sinful David with Christ being handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. There is no 'con job' about the gospel, it is based on an actual judgement and an actual resurrection.

Those in Christ are new creations and live with sure promises and certain hope (2 Corinthians 5:17–21). Our lives are empowered through his Spirit who floods our hearts with God's love (Romans 5:5). We 'bow our knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name'. To him be the glory forever (Ephesians 4:14–21)!

The story of Abraham and Sarah – a marriage without equal in the Bible – contains many rich themes which are developed throughout the Scriptures. God gives them hospitality and friendship (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23). He takes them and goes with them on a journey (Acts 7:2ff; Hebrews 11:8). God gives them a vision and a promise of what he has planned (John 8:56) and writes a story that is foundational for all that follows (Galatians 3:6ff; Hebrews 2:16, 6:15, 7:1ff). God's strategy, plan and purpose is set out for all the nations (Acts 3:13ff Romans 4:1ff; Galatians 3:1ff; Hebrews 11:8ff; James 2:21ff).

We too can live in renewed community of faith, in one where, as Paul testifies:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:28, 29).

The Lord is generous to all who call on him

Romans 9:30–10:21

Children of the living God

Paul saw Israel rejecting God when they had received

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).

Paul says Israel's response to God's mercy and grace does not mean God failed. The stories of Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, show God's priorities in achieving his promised purposes differed from those involved. In both examples, God's elective purposes are fulfilled. God's covenant promises ensured there was a remnant from Israel, and that the promise of the restoration of the nation of Israel would be fulfilled (Romans 9:6–13).

Paul also addresses the issue of justice, reminding his readers that God is merciful and gracious according to his own will (Romans 9:14–18). Justice only operates where legitimate claims exist. There is no point questioning God's government, when, according to his own priorities, he reveals his saving glory to both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 9:19–24).

The children of the living God were not, by their own righteousness, his people, but are now called loved by God with a love which is elective and so effective (Romans 9:25–29). Paul's chilling reminder of a remnant saved when judgement comes provides a basis for his discussion about 'the stumbling stone' (Romans 9:32, 33).

(These accounts remind us of the dangers of misjudging people's apparent responsiveness to God's goodness by their nationality (cf. Ezekiel 18:1ff; Jeremiah 31:27–34)).

Striving for righteousness: The precious Cornerstone

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness [through faith], have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law [nor did they receive the righteousness that comes by faith]. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame' (Romans 9:30–33).

The references to righteousness through faith in verse 30 and to belief in the stone laid in Zion in verse 33 are linked: faith-righteousness and release from shame both mean liberation from dismay, despair, panic and anxiety (cf. Romans 1:16, 10:11).

Paul mentions striving for (pursuing) faith-righteousness or law-righteousness three times (Romans 9:30–33; cf. Acts 17:27). The Gentiles, not striving for faith-righteousness, attained it anyway, while Israel, striving for law-righteousness, stumbled. Little could be more confronting to the religiously minded Jew than God giving faith-righteousness to those not even seeking it. Yet the wonder of God's kindness to the Gentiles needs appreciation for its glorious grace independent of any impact on those who are put to shame (cf. Romans 2:4).

Israel's history was built on stumbling stones, on events where God's mercy and grace were pivotal to their survival and prosperity. These divine works called for faith-righteousness, where they were precious cornerstones, yet they became stumbling stones for those seeking law-righteousness. God's sovereignty is not abstract: it actualises in history according to his own being and plan. Paul uses prophecies from Isaiah to make his point:

The LORD of Hosts ... will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken (Isaiah 8:13–15; cf. Jeremiah 6:21; Ezekiel 3:20).⁶⁰

Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem. Because you have said, 'We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter'; therefore thus says the Lord GOD, 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 28:14–16)

The psalmist celebrated God's deliverance through his rejected Messiah:

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the

⁶⁰ cf. J. A. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah, The* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999), p. 95.

day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Psalm 118:19–24).

In a similar vein, the prophet Zechariah wrote of the LORD of Hosts removing the ‘guilt of the land in a single day’ through his Servant-Branch whose rule of grace removes obstacles ‘not by might, nor by power’ but by his Spirit. His people celebrate the placing of a capstone on a new temple ‘amid shouts of “Grace, grace to it!”’ (Zechariah 3:1–4:14).

Righteousness for all who believe

Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (Romans 10:1–4).

God’s sovereignty is his business; ours is to act with compassion, even where and when we might think God is hardening someone. In developing his thoughts from Romans 9:1–5, Paul is not calculating to whom God might be merciful, especially when he knows that God shows mercy even on those who are not striving for faith-righteousness. The human dilemma exists not because of what God cannot do, but because of what we will not do.

Verse 3 describes a basic error in all religious activity, in all human self-centred striving. God’s righteousness is always faith-righteousness and never legalism-righteousness or works-righteousness. Because of Christ, those who believe in God’s salvation no longer need to use the law to try to achieve righteousness. The law was always intended to be lived out as an expression of thankfulness for God’s deliverance. Unless faith-righteousness operates, self-justifying legalism will reign. Christ not only provides God’s righteousness to those who believe, he ensures that law-righteous efforts trip up and fall down because of their context.

The generous Lord

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim) (Romans 10:5–8).

The quote in Verse 5 is from Leviticus 18:5 (cf. Galatians 3:12), while verses 6 to 8 are from Deuteronomy 30:12–14. Paul distinguishes between expressing love for God by obeying the law from the heart, leading to ‘life and prosperity’, and

rejecting the law altogether or trying to fulfil it by self-justifying works, bringing 'death and adversity' (cf. Deuteronomy 30:11–20).

... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Romans 10:9–13).

Verse 9 makes better sense if the 'word of faith' is 'that if' one confesses and believes. The order of verse 9 matches verse 8, but is reversed in verse 10, where the personal response order is used. The near-word, the faith-word, proclaimed by Paul is that Jesus is Lord, with God confirming and affirming his Lordship in Christ's resurrection (cf. Romans 1:4, 4:24, 25, 5:10 and 6:4–10). Note that

'Confession without faith would be vain. But likewise faith without confession would be shown to be spurious.'⁶¹

Salvation and justification are inextricably linked, with salvation being the common theme in verse 9, while Paul refers to justification in verse 10.

The reference to heart in verse 10 is to the heart as the fountain of life, flowing through the mind, soul and actions, including what a person confesses (cf. Proverbs 4:23).

Paul repeats the earlier quote (Romans 9:33), reminding us that the Lordship of Christ is personally powerful, majestic and dynamic. There is no distinction (cf. Romans 3:19–26; Galatians 3:26–29). Christ's lordship is local and personal, familial and ethnic, and global and international. He 'is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him' (Romans 10:12, cf. 2:4).

The quote from Joel 2:32 has the context of God pouring out his spirit on all flesh, 'even on the male and female slaves', and on them prophesying before the 'great and terrible day of the LORD' (Joel 2:28–31; cf. Zechariah 3:1–14; Acts 2:14–21; Galatians 3:26–29)!

Paul links Christ to the covenant LORD in Joel's prophecy. To call on the name of the LORD is to call on Christ as Lord. It means engaging in vocative worship, as well as requesting deliverance, all from a generous, gracious and merciful God.

⁶¹ John Murray, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 56.

The word of Christ

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (Romans 10:14–17).

The order is clear: people hear, believe, are sent, they go and proclaim. Others believe and are called, and the ministry lifecycle continues. But however beautiful the journey, the suffering of rejection accompanies preachers on their travels.

The quote from Isaiah 52:7 conveys 'the character of the message being brought'.⁶² The accompanying reference to Isaiah 53:1 further emphasises the extent of Israel's rejection of the good news of the 'word of Christ' which brings faith (cf. Romans 10:8). When we speak the good news, it is Christ's word: he speaks. We are not passing on a dead and inert word (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20).

Words to the ends of the world

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for 'Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.' Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.' Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, 'I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.' But of Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people' (Romans 10:18–21).

Psalm 19:4, quoted in verse 18, refers to God's revelation in creation, not redemption, though the whole Psalm covers law, grace and creation. Paul described a gospel for all nations and all generations, including those who received God's gifts to Israel (Romans 9:4, 5, cf. 1:14ff, 2:11ff; Acts 17:24–31). Perhaps he is also reminding his readers that

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God,

⁶² Ibid., 59.

through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Romans 2:14–16).

There is certainly no question that God's specific revelation of himself in Christ brings the rich freedom of faith-righteousness, the fullness of the abundance described in chapters 5 to 8, and the release from shame, dismay, despair, panic and anxiety that Paul highlighted in Romans 9:33 and 10:11.

Paul's further affirmation of God's grace to the nations in these verses adds to his powerful earlier declaration that the 'Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained ... righteousness through faith' (Romans 9:30).

Verses 19 and 20 quote from Deuteronomy 32:21 and Isaiah 65:1, 2. The contrast between the breadth of proclamation and Israel's response is great.

Do not be proud, but stand in awe

God's gifts are now shared with all 'the children of the living God' (Romans 9:4, 5, 26).

Israelites *with faith* are the remnant, but *without faith* stumble.

Gentiles *with faith* are found while not seeking, but *without faith* are without hope and without God (cf. Ephesians 2:12).

Paul indicated the need for true listening and faithful proclaiming. His doxology and appeal (Romans 11:33–12:2) present the glorious generosity of God and the appropriate response for those of us who receive his grace and mercy.

While we are beneficiaries of the rejection by the Jews of God's mercy and grace in Christ (Romans 11:15), we need to hear Paul's prophetic warning concerning our place in God's plan (Romans 11:13–22; cf. Romans 1:17; Habakkuk 2:4, 3:2).

Seven promises for the people of God

Revelation 1:9–20

The first and the last

When we think of new year's resolutions with our 'Don't List', and/or our 'Do List', it helps to remember Jesus' message to Peter that he had prayed for him that his faith would not fail – not that Peter would not fail. Christ prays for us prior to the situations that arise, and then prays with us in them (Luke 22:32). It is his Spirit who intercedes for us at depths beyond our understanding (Romans 8:26, 27).

Life involves learning from the past, living for the future and loving in the present. We have been forgiven, justified, and sanctified. As the Creed says, 'We look for the resurrection of the dead', or else despair may dominate us, and '... the life of the world to come', or hope may remain illusory.

John was 'in the Spirit on the Lord's day' and was given messages for seven churches by

one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force (Revelation 1:10–16).

John was told not to be afraid, with the one who spoke declaring: 'I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades' (Revelation 1:17–18).

Wherever and whenever we are, it is this 'one like the Son of Man' who speaks and acts, and to whom the Spirit testifies. The revelation we have is God-given. It is from the Alpha and Omega, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' (Revelation 1:1–8, 12, 13, 19 and 4:1–5:14).

Seven promises for the people of God

The messages given to each of the churches have common elements:

- The churches are addressed by name.
- The speaker is identified, and knows and cares for the churches.
- The churches are affirmed (except for Laodicea, apart from an implied ability to change).
- The churches are rebuked (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia).
- The churches are warned (except for Philadelphia, with the warning to Smyrna being about external affliction not internal failure).

Living in Love and Freedom

- Promises are given to overcomers, to those who press on.
- A call is given to listen to the Spirit.

Some people believe these messages to the seven churches describe seven sequential church ages, while others think they apply in parallel throughout history. There is enough consistency with other Scriptures in the descriptions of Christ and his promises to the churches for us to consider our own response to what the churches were told.

These messages unite to form one message to the whole church, as well as being specific messages for individual churches at a given time. Sometimes our situations and responses are – have been, or will be – like those described. Over time these correlations may change. On some days, seasons or years, we may seem like more like we are at Ephesus, or Smyrna, or Pergamum, or Thyatira, or Sardis, or Philadelphia, or Laodicea.

Life (Ephesus, Revelation 2:1–7)

From ‘him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands ... To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God’.

God promises **life** for those in a community who press on, having worked hard and faithfully at difficult tasks, but where the fire in their hearts had cooled, and their love for people had faded. Note the links between light (truth), love and life.

Hope (Smyrna, Revelation 2:8–11)

From ‘the first and the last, who was dead and came to life ... Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ... Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death’.

God gives **hope** to people who trust him, especially when they are being persecuted, have others slander them, and experience hard times where their physical, moral and spiritual resources are low, with the likelihood that things will only get worse! The ‘second death’ is discussed in Revelation 20:6, 14 and 21:8.

Renewal (Pergamum, Revelation 2:12–17)

From ‘him who has the sharp two-edged sword ... To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it’.

God promises nourishment and **renewal** for those who are still holding to their faith while under physical, moral or spiritual attack, so that they may not be weakened and embrace false teaching and bad behaviours in their struggle.

Opportunity (Thyatira, Revelation 2:18–29)

From ‘the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze ... To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered – even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star’.

God promises fresh and richer **opportunities** for an already fruitful community; one where ‘love, faith, service, and patient endurance’ are evident, but who need to ensure they are not seduced into committing immorality by false teaching and evil worship.

Purity (Sardis, Revelation 3:1–6)

From ‘him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars ... If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels’.

God promises **purity** for those in a community who remember what they have heard, and who are worthy people with good reputations. Others have ‘soiled their clothes’, and so have become lifeless and hopeless, no longer remembering the truth they have heard.

Love (Philadelphia, Revelation 3:7–13)

From ‘the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens ... 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’.

God promises an open door into his temple for those who have kept his word and have become a community of **love** and life. Other people will learn he has loved them, and although weak, they will be strengthened to resist opposition and remain secure in the truth.

Destiny (Laodicea, Revelation 3:14–22)

From the ‘Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation ... Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne’.

God promises a **destiny** for those who ‘buy gold from [Christ] and become rich’, who dialogue with him, and awaken to his plan, purpose and power.

Living in God's community

We, like the seven churches, are not alone. With the community of God's people, we are to see the voice, hear the Spirit, and serve and worship Father-God. The messages are given to the churches – and not to unbelievers, though they are relevant to all people. They are promises about *who* we are and *who* we will become because of Christ's 'I will', and not primarily about *what* we need to do to earn his approval. They indicate that he gives because he knows, and that the actions of those who conquer flow from their trust in him. To conquer means knowing that 'God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything' (1 John 3:20, cf. 5:9). In discerning truth by the Spirit, we can trust that 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4).

The warnings show Christ's kindness, care and compassion as Shepherd-King and Priest. They are given after the revelations of Christ as speaker and his declarations that he knows the churches. They come before the promises to conquerors and the assurances that the Spirit's testimony and Christ's message are one with the Father's intention to bless his people. It is this testimony about God that follows in Revelation chapter 4, and which presents the battles described in chapters 5 to 18 before declaring the final victories in chapters 19 to 22.

'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' ... 'It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.' The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift (Revelation 22:12–17).

God's forever love

Psalm 136

Introduction

This Psalm was probably written when David was king, and sung under Asaph as worship leader and Zadok as priest (1 Chronicles 16:34). Solomon used this theme at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 5:13, 7:3), as did Jehoshaphat when going to war against his enemies (2 Chronicles 20:21). When the people of God returned from exile the same pattern of worship is described (Ezra 3:11).

Main themes

Psalm 136 thanks the LORD 'for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever'.

Psalm 136:1–4 thanks the LORD for who he is.

Psalm 136:5–9 thanks the LORD for creation.

Psalm 136:10–22 thanks the LORD for community.

Psalm 136:23–26 summarises the LORD's compassion.

Give thanks to the LORD

Psalm 136:1–4 is a general thanksgiving for the LORD's goodness and love, and for his sovereignty over other gods and rulers. As Covenant-Father-God he is good and love in himself and in all he does. His goodness and love are permanent and sustainable. He is sovereign over other (heavenly) gods and (earthly) rulers, and everything he does expresses his goodness and love. God's goodness and love are not because he is great but he is great because 'he is good' and 'his steadfast love endures forever'.

The LORD is creator

Psalm 136:5–9 is more than a summary of Genesis chapter one. Creation is the LORD's work alone, not that of, or with, any other god or gods. Creation is an act and expression of God's love and goodness. God loves, he is creative, and all he creates is good – and humanity is created very good! He loves, and persists in loving all he creates, with each human person made in his image and likeness. Because God is loving and good as Creator, we are not to think he is 'battling against the odds' in caring for creation and humanity in an unpredictable and hostile environment (cf. Psalm 24:1, 115:3, 135:6).

The LORD establishes community

Psalm 136:10–16 reminds Israel of the Exodus. Their deliverance was more than a divine act which gave them an opportunity to escape slavery. The LORD 'made Israel' escape. Israel needed to be taken from Egypt, and their Egyptian life needed to be taken from Israel.

Psalm 136:17–22 reminds Israel that God’s settling them in the promised land was also contested and required his intervention. Israel needed not only to enter the Promised Land, but God’s promises – not the Canaanite lifestyle – needed to ‘enter’ Israel.

The LORD’s actions against other nations may trouble us. How can a loving and good God act this way? Why does he strike down and kill (cf. Deuteronomy 32:39)? How does what we learn in the New Testament affect our understanding of this (and other) Psalms?

The Exodus narrative indicates that Canaanites did not welcome the Israelites, just as the Israelites were only welcome in Egypt as slaves. Abraham had arrived from Haran around five centuries earlier as a prosperous and well-regarded leader. His contact with other tribes led to his involvement in solving a series of tribal disputes, and to his encounter with King Melchizedek. When Sarah died, he still had not purchased any land. His grandson Jacob experienced hostility from neighbouring tribes. The story of Joseph reveals the extent to which hard times brought a declining level of prosperity and stability. This lack of hospitality is contrary to God’s care for the orphan, the widow and the stranger (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17, 24:19, 24:20, 24:21, 27:19).

Psalm 138:7 describes how God’s attitude to the proud and self-sufficient ensures the manner of their ultimate decline and lack of sustainability. He acts against the anger of those who oppose him. He unravels the power of the rebel lords and cares for the poor. God’s covenant love and goodness come to his people in practical situations to establish and preserve them in their life together. His love is personally and community focused.

The LORD is compassionate

Psalm 136:23–26 summaries the LORD’s remembrance of his people’s past struggles. God keeps us in mind through his kindness, care and compassion, as well as in his judgement (cf. Psalm 137) – his steadfast love endures in all situations and circumstances.

The people of God have almost continually known times of ‘low estate’, as the songs of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10) and Mary (Luke 1:46–55) remind us. Psalms 135:14 tells us that ‘the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants’, while Psalm 138:6–8 emphasises that

... though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The LORD will fulfil his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Living in covenant love

Psalms 136 describes the LORD's covenant love for his people (cf. Psalm 105:1–44; 1 Chronicles 16:7–35). It affirms that creation is a love-gift. In summarising their history, the psalmist is reminding them that Abraham and Moses were God's covenant-friends (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23; Exodus 33:11), and that Noah, like Enoch before him, knew God's covenant grace (Genesis 6:8, 5:21). The descriptions of God's covenant with Moses emphasise God's faithfulness and love (Exodus 15:1–21, 20:1–17, 34:1–17; Numbers 13:26–14:19; Deuteronomy 4:1–11:32).

Over 150 references to God's love in the Psalms describe God's care for his people (e.g. Psalms 31:21, 33:18, 42:8, 57:3, 59:10, 66:20, 77:8, 98:3) as well as affirm his own person, purposes and promises (e.g. Psalms 100:5, 103:11, 147:11). Both themes are relevant to humanity with its history of failure (e.g. Psalm 106:1, 45; Psalm 107:18, 15, 21, 31).

As we reflect on Psalm 136, we can learn much about living in covenant love. We see God's people at worship, learn about his love, hope for his goodness to care for us in the future as in the past, and know that his covenant is to be shared with all the nations and in faithful care for and use of his creation.

Together with thanksgiving

Prior to Jesus' death he spoke of his Father's love for him, and of their love for God's family (John 15:9ff). God's love is covenant love (Luke 22:7–20). We are given life in God's family and not left as orphans (John 14:15–21). The bridegroom has come (cf. John 3:29, 14:1–3). We are the body of Christ, the Father's family, and God's Spirit is with us (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27; John 17:11). Jesus concluded his final prayer before his arrest by praying for us to know God's love in unity (John 17:22, 23).

We have been crucified with Christ, and we no longer attempt to live by our own resources, but by Christ who lives in us. We now live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us (cf. Galatians 2:19, 20). Being crucified with Christ means that when others attack us, he takes us into his death and resurrection. It means that when we fail, he takes us as we are and redeems, ransoms and restores us. The communion meal is a thanksgiving to God for his forever goodness and love.

Seedtime and harvest

Mark 4:26–34

There will be a harvest

Comparing the kingdom of God to the sower is a reminder about divine mysteries. God uses creational illustrations to help us learn about God and his kingdom. Jesus is the primary sower of the word. As God's beloved Son, he is more than a faithful speaker of the word of God; he is God with us, anointed by the Holy Spirit for his ministry (Mark 1:1–15).

Jesus hoped that those who heard his teaching and listened to his parables would do more than try to look at the kingdom of God through the lens of human events. He wanted people to receive and listen to the Holy Spirit, without whom no one can ever hear God's word or know his love and forgiveness. To be baptised in the Holy Spirit is not just something that happens at conversion or in some ecstatic second experience. Being immersed in the Holy Spirit is a gift for every day and all situations. It is a gift from Messiah Jesus given under the Father's authority. This is the dynamic life-changing reality of the kingdom of God. It is the powerful truth indicated by John the Baptist's 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Mark 1:4, forgiveness is mentioned eight times in Mark chapters 1 to 4).

In helping people learn this and live in his kingdom, Jesus told this parable about a sower. It was as if he was walking along the road one day and saw a farmer sowing or reaping, and paused, and said, 'Look at the farmers, the kingdom of God is like them – sowing, waiting, watching, and then reaping. They don't know how it all happens, how the earth produces the crop, how the seed sprouts and grows, but they do know that the harvest comes, and when it comes, they don't delay – they get on with the harvesting!'

This parable is important partly because it has no commentary on good and bad seed, nothing about thorns and stones and dusty, hard footpaths. It is silent about evildoers planting weeds, about seed being stolen or eaten by hungry birds. The parable is about sowing, waiting, watching and reaping. Jesus wanted to share something of what he is doing in sowing the word, and then waiting and watching for the harvest. Not even Jesus, as man, knew everything that was happening because of his ministry!

Jesus is what he says

Jesus not only sows seed, his ministry was sown, sprouted, grew and harvested. It is described in two sequences in Mark's Gospel. In chapter one Jesus received the Holy Spirit's anointing and blessing as God's Son at his baptism. He was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness before commencing a public ministry which confronted evil spirits, religious authorities and unbelieving people with the kingdom of God in action. Mark says a lot about families, including Jesus' own.

The kingdom of which Jesus speaks is from his Father for human communities. It is the reign of the Holy Spirit who immerses the people of God in the love and truth of God.

After Peter's confession climaxes the first section of his Gospel, Mark records a second sequence of sowing and reaping, beginning with a divine re-affirmation at Jesus' transfiguration, and then a spiritual battle. In this second section Jesus focuses on explaining his coming death and resurrection. The harvest of his resurrection transfigures not only Moses and Elijah, more are baptised than John ever did. All believers will be changed into Christ's likeness as the Father's Son by the power, presence and participation of the Holy Spirit.

This miracle is not just for the Jewish nation, though it is certainly for them. Mark writes of a gentile woman whom Jesus healed in the first part of the Gospel, and in the second half of his Gospel, Mark tells of the Roman Centurion who declares Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 7:26, 15:39). The Gospel has an extra ending where Jesus told his followers to 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation' (Mark 16:15). There will be a harvest! A harvest from all nations, and from the creation as well! The earth will produce a great harvest, a harvest that reaches beyond church boundaries to invite all humanity to live in the kingdom of God!

In case we miss Mark's point in this parable he amplifies his message by the parable of a mustard seed – a small seed which produces a great harvest.

Application

Hope

We can be a people of hope because of the certainty of God's harvest. We can have hope even in times of trouble, even as seed is choked by thorns and restricted by stony ground. Just as Jesus later taught the disciples that prayer is needed when ministry seems unsuccessful (Mark 9:28, 29), so we can hope in his presence and comfort for our lives. There are five stories of Jesus in Mark where Jesus comments on people's faith, on their present assurance of future reality – on their hope (Mark 2:5, 4:40, 5:34, 10:52, 11:22).

Caution

If our sowing, watching, waiting and reaping is aligned with the kingdom of God, then it will flow from us being immersed in the Holy Spirit and hearing Jesus speak to us as the Father's Son. The model is not primarily behavioural, simply copying the good things Jesus did. It is living relationally in the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the community of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14). Otherwise, we will be those who look, but do not see, and listen, but do not learn; and fail to turn again and be forgiven (Mark 4:12; cf. Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 6:9, 10, 44:18; Jeremiah 5:21).

Living in Love and Freedom

... do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ... Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. ... Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh ... (Galatians 5:16–25, 6:7–10).

Opportunity

As Matthew and Luke report, the harvest is abundant, the opportunities are many and the workers are few (Matthew 9:37; Luke 10:2). Mark's testimony through this parable is echoed in the final ending of his Gospel:

And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. ... So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it' (Mark 16:15–20).

Opportunities to reap a rich harvest by living in the kingdom of God by the Holy Spirit is a significant theme in Paul's letters (Romans 1:13; 2 Corinthians 9:10; Philippians 1:11; cf. James 3:18, 5:18):

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

Live by the Spirit, ... (be) led by the Spirit, ... (for) the (harvest) of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ... if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith (Galatians 5:16–25, 6:7–10).

Harvest time

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,
and would sleep and rise night and day,
and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.
The earth produces of itself,
first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

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But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come (Mark 4:26–29).

The results of the harvest are material and spiritual. Today is harvest day. Today is for fresh sowing, for watching and waiting while seeds sprout, grow and become ready for harvesting. Today is the day of the Spirit. Today the kingdom of God is present among us.

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God’ (Mark 14:22–25).

More than enough for everyone

Mark 8:1–9

There was again a great crowd without anything to eat

This event was at the peak of Jesus' public ministry, a brief season of fruitfulness following the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–30), prior to his transfiguration, his teaching about his impending death (Mark 9:1–13), and his going to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32ff).

After hearing from the disciples about their ministry, he had wanted to find a restful place 'For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat'. People recognised where he was going by boat, and had 'hurried' to where he was headed 'on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things', before feeding the crowd of five thousand men (Mark 6:30–44).

Following the walking on water transit 'people rushed about the whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed' (Mark 6:45–56).

Mark tells of a woman who, while Jesus was in 'the region of Tyre', 'begged him to cast a demon out of her daughter, ... the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin ... she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone'. Mark also records that Jesus, on his return, healed a deaf man with a speech impediment. Those who witnessed his healing 'were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak"' (Mark 7:24–37).

Some have come from a great distance

The feeding of the four thousand people took place 'In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat'. The crowd, some of whom had 'come a great distance', a possible reference to Gentiles, had been with Jesus and the disciples for three days and were without food (Mark 8:1–3). Several further ministry events follow immediately after the feeding of the four thousand.

This gathering together to witness the kingdom of God in action, under its messianic ruler was in some sense prophesied in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. Jacob, on his deathbed declared that 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his' (Genesis 49:10).

Micah and Isaiah prophesied of nations coming 'to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' Reconciliation, security and peace follow international arbitration and the destruction of weaponry.

In that day, says the LORD, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore (Micah 4:1–7; cf. Isaiah 2:2–5).

Bread in the desert

There was precedence for God feeding his people in remote places. Deuteronomy records Moses reminding the Israelites of the provision of manna in the desert (also cf. Abraham meeting Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17–20)). If they were to 'live and increase', they were to 'understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD'. They were to enter a land where they would 'lack nothing', and not forget the humbling experience of their journey to that abundance. Jesus had also endured a desert experience prior to his ministry, only his was not from disobedience, but in the power and presence of the Spirit (Deuteronomy 8:1–9; cf. Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Mark 1:12–13).

The psalmist sang of the goodness and abundance of God as Creator, reminding us that the provision of manna and the miracles of Jesus were aligned with the act and structure of creation itself. They were part of God's restorative purpose:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm (Psalm 33:6–9).

They ate and were filled

The miraculous multiplication of bread in Mark 8:5–9 is not difficult for God whose own being involves the eternal relationships of Father, Son and Spirit, and who has created this world by his breath and word from things that do not exist.

Jesus' declaration to his listeners is an invitation for them to participate in his kingdom:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ... Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? ... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things (the Holy Spirit) to those who ask him (Matthew 7:7–11; cf. Luke 11:9–13)!

The crowd that gathered were not just fed bread, but were given the bread of life. Their time together was a prototype of the community that would be born at Pentecost, and which Israel as a nation had been God's preparative context. Jesus had taught them that his saving work was personal, not individual. It was for communities, people and nations, and not just for aggregations of isolated, separated entities.

The people of God are promised his care and shelter now and for all eternity:

They [a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb] will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 7:9, 16–17).

The broken bread speaks of the people being together, of unity shared, and not of disunity or fragmentation. Jesus breaks bread to fill hungry hearts while healing fractured lives. He does not break hearts through distrust and dishonesty. He does not break backs by imposing burdens and tyrannical domination. His bread is the bread of life. It is eternal nourishment for daily life in this present creation.

And he sent them away

The crowd was to return to their own communities, where each one lived and worked. They were to go back to where they were, but there was a difference. They were not what they were. They had been with Jesus; they had heard of his Father and his kingdom. They had received from his Holy Spirit refreshment and power for this new life together as his people. They were *gathered* by God to hear the *Word* of God by the *Spirit* of God to be the *family*, the *community*, of God, going and doing the *will* of God! They were to share the life of which Jesus spoke (Matthew 6:9–13; cf. Luke 11:2–4).

Note 1

In Psalm 2, the psalmist tells

of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession' ... Now therefore, ... Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling ... Happy are all who take refuge in him.

Isaiah 64:1–8 recorded the prophet's longing that the LORD 'would tear open the heavens and come down', and he did – the crowd saw 'God the only Son', anointed by the Spirit, revealing God in himself and by his actions! The Temple curtain was soon to be torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), but here the reality of God's creative and restorative purposes and power was already evident. Lives were restored and people healed, as they came together to

hear the Word of God by the Spirit of God in the presence of the Father! This is the Father whom

no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, [and] who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways ... O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand (Isaiah 64:4, 5, 8).

Mark begins his Gospel writing 'of the good news of Jesus [Saviour] Christ [Messiah], the Son of God [the Father]'. He records Jesus' baptism, where Jesus 'saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"' (Mark 1:1–11).

Luke records that Jesus, in the synagogue at Nazareth, read from

the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:16–19).

John, the disciple, wrote of Jesus as the Creator who 'was in the world ... yet the world did not know him' (John 1:10). The Galilean crowds saw the glory that John declared:

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 1:14–18, cf. 1:29–36, 3:27–36).

Note 2

It was not all that long after this miracle that Jesus was having the Passover meal with his disciples, prior to his death (Mark 14:22–24). Following his death and resurrection, the early Christian community 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people' (Acts 2:42–47). This pattern of sharing together was ongoing – the breaking of bread in the Upper Room became a central activity of the Church, with the apostolic encouragement that 'as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). As in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught of a coming kingdom, of a new *era*.

Ethics

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- Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil (Matthew 5:17).
- You have heard that it ... But I say to you ... (Matthew 5:44).

Relationships

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).
- Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven ... (Matthew 6:9).
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44).

Action

- whoever does [the commandments] and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19).
- In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets (Matthew 7:12).
- Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 7:21).

Your King comes to you

Mark 11:1–11

Introduction

This passage starts the final section of Mark's Gospel. Jesus had demonstrated and proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, and had shown what kind of Messiah and Son of God he was, including by explaining his coming death and resurrection.

Preparation

Mark 11:1–6 describes the preparation for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem was nearing completion, and 'they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives' (Mark 11:1). Numbers of people would have come with him to celebrate the Passover, and would have heard about or witnessed what happened on the way. Mark 10 describes the questioning by the Pharisees about divorce, the encounter with the rich young ruler and the gift of sight to Bartimaeus as they were leaving Jericho. Along the way, Jesus explained to his disciples that he was not about to receive a royal welcome from the religious and political leaders on his arrival in Jerusalem.

There is a poignancy about Jesus coming through Bethpage and Bethany, as these two towns were near the Mount of Olives. It was there that he was to tell his disciples about the destruction of the temple and the end of the sacrificial cultus, along with describing the false messiahs who would arise and the troubles they would bring. It was there that he would go with his disciples after sharing the last supper with them, and speak about the sheep being scattered when the shepherd was struck (Mark 13:3 and 14:26; cf. Zechariah 13:7).

Borrowing a donkey-colt indicated the nature of his coming. It was a sign of the arrival of a king who would rebuild and enlarge the Davidic empire. This restoration would bring 'peace to the nations', and not involve military force, but would be established by 'the blood of my covenant with you' (Zechariah 9:9–11, 10:1; cf. I Chronicles 17:1–15).

The restoration would bring liberation to 'prisoners of hope'. The oppressed of God's people would receive restoration as first-born children (Zechariah 9:12). They would be fruitful and productive, with God overthrowing the false prophets and the rulers who did not care for the people (Zechariah 10:1ff).

Arrival

Mark 11:7–11 describes Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. After Jesus entered Jerusalem, he 'looked around at everything, [and] as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.' The borrowing and returning of the previously unriden donkey-colt highlighted the lack of any royal welcome for Jesus from the religious

or political establishment. The affirmations he received were most likely from other pilgrims who knew of his ministry in Galilee, and not from the local population. The views of the Pharisees about him were clear enough, even though he seemed to be the only one who understood their intentions (Mark 8:31, 32, 9:30–32, 10:32–34).

Centuries earlier the psalmist had asked ‘Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?’ (Psalm 24:3) Only one person has clean hands and a pure heart, and has not lifted up his soul to what is false or sworn deceitfully. Only this one receives the ultimate blessing and vindication. The rest of us need God’s mercy and grace for purity and holiness.

The crowd who cried ‘Hosanna’ were ‘the company of those who seek ... the face of God of Jacob’, who personally saw his Son come to his Temple in meekness and humility as their Creator-King (Psalm 24:6). This was his true glory, his true majesty and strength, seen precisely because the gates were not lifted up, and the ancient doors not opened. The crowd’s response, unlike the leaders, was aligned with the testimony of the psalmist in Psalm 24.

It was not the size of the crowd or the length of the ride that mattered. Waving palm branches, spreading clothing on the road and calling out ‘Hosanna’ hardly involved a political or military confrontation to Rome or Jerusalem. The event was not significant because of its size but by its substance. Jesus was announcing a new spiritual and ethical regime, he was establishing a new divine kingdom based on truth, love, righteousness and justice. His reign was to be characterised by grace, mercy and peace and not by severity, harshness and conflict.

Psalm 118 tells the story of deliverance from defeat and death because ‘the LORD helped me’, and as Jesus entered Jerusalem a new generation celebrated with thanksgiving (Psalm 118:13). Through the rejection of the religious and political leadership, and the crowd who backed them, Jesus became our salvation: ‘This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it’ (Psalm 118:13, 23, 24) Those who come in the LORD’s name are surely blessed, for ‘he has given us light’ (Psalm 118:27). The Apostle Paul was later recorded as testifying that it is God

who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:9, 10; cf. 1 Timothy 6:16).

We can share the psalmist’s joy and hope: ‘You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever’ (Psalm 118:28, 29).

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Through the cross, God is affirming that 'I am with you in life's troubles'. In this story, Jesus reveals God, and God in him reveals true humanity. In Jesus, humanity responds to God's prior initiative to relieve human misery and need. In Jesus, humanity anticipates its ultimate creational destiny and so avoids deathly doom and demise.

Family matters

Proverbs 3:1–12, 4:1–9

Family crises

Information about family crises is readily identified. In response to these dilemmas, churches, schools and religious organisations develop pastoral care initiatives for the welfare of those in their care, while governments and community agencies explore beneficial educational, social and parental priorities in general social settings.

While Proverbs 22:6 wisely urges parents to ‘Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray’, life does not run according to any one formula. Ezekiel and Jeremiah testify to a more complex picture:

The word of the LORD came to Ezekiel: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel (Ezekiel 18:1–3; cf. Jeremiah 31:29).

Family issues, and the decline of Western Christianity during the last century, cannot be simply consigned to poor parenting by any given generation. Each person has responsibilities, whether as a parent or as a child, and healthy relationships require honest and accountable communication within an agreed belief framework. God’s goal for humanity includes personal, family, community, national and global reconciliation:

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses ... that I commanded him ... Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah ... He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents (Malachi 4:4–6).

Purpose and context

The paternal lineage depicted in the Hebrew Bible defines epochs by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon, and Ezra and Nehemiah. The Davidic kingdoms 2.5 to 3 millennia ago were the context where the Hebrew community wrote this vision for family life.

The Hebrew Bible has major sections covering Law, Prophets and Writings, with Writings containing Wisdom literature in Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and selected Psalms. These Wisdom writings give little, if any, prophetic history and make few references to worship, law, ritual, or sacrifice.⁶³ Their great value is in their record

⁶³ For example, Proverbs 28:4, 7, 9 and 29, 9, 18 refer to law; Proverbs 2:17 to covenant; and Proverbs 7:14, 15:8, 21:3 and 21:27 to sacrifice.

of wisdom in the faith context provided by the books of the Law and the Prophets, set in everyday community environments.

As part of this Wisdom literature, the book of Proverbs speaks about these life issues, where suffering from sickness, calamity and persecution is frequently present. The book of Proverbs records the people's wisdom and understanding, gleaned as they struggled with neighbouring empires.⁶⁴ They lived in a world interacting with other faith communities that sharply and persistently opposed their world-view and belief-systems.

The book of Proverbs provides a compass, an orientation, and a map. It is not primarily giving formulae, prescriptions or legislation. It is not a list of recipes for a trouble-free life. The sayings are not recorded as judgements, in the manner of Job's comforters, to be imposed on vulnerable believers trapped into guilt, legalism, hopelessness and fear of failure. The reader is repeatedly urged to gain the understanding and wisdom that bring rich interpretations of the proverbs in their original context.

The book of Proverbs is in three sections: a father's advice and profiles of wisdom (1:1–9:18), seven collections of sayings (10:1–31:9),⁶⁵ and an acrostic poem about a good wife (31:10–31). Each collection of proverbs has a different structure and emphasis.⁶⁶ The book is written from a male viewpoint with references implying that the mother is included with the father (Proverbs 1:8, 4:3 and 6:20).⁶⁷ It follows that the representation of the faithful son in the first section of Proverbs is also a valuable resource for a wise woman wanting to discern a quality husband, as well as a source of advice which mothers and fathers can share with their daughters. The last poem is similarly relevant for all children. If the narrative was based on an actual father, then, given the implicit link of the father's advice with the poem about a good wife, it is likely that he was an influential community leader (Proverbs 31:23). As the issues at stake include spiritual and material inheritance, the father's conversation would be particularly relevant for his eldest son, although his comments would apply to all his children.

⁶⁴ For example, Babylonian (Jeremiah 50:35, 51:57); Egyptian (1 Kings 4:30; Genesis 41:8; Exodus 7:11); Canaanite (Ezekiel 28:3, 17), Edomite (Jeremiah 49:7; Obadiah 8; Job 2:11)

⁶⁵ Marie Turner, unpublished: 'Most of the proverbs consist of two stichs each and are antithetic parallelisms.'

⁶⁶ First Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 10:1–22:16), Words of the Wise (Proverbs 22:17–24:22), Other Sayings of the Wise (Proverbs 24:23–34), Second Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 25:1–29:27), Words of Agur (Proverbs 30:1–14), Numerical Proverbs (Proverbs 30:15–33) and Words of King Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1–9)

⁶⁷ Proverbs 1:8 'Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching'; Proverbs 4:3 'When I was a son with my father, tender, and my mother's favourite'; Proverbs 6:20 'My child, keep your father's commandment, and do not forsake your mother's teaching.' See also Proverbs 10:1, 15:20, 19:26, 20:20, 23:22, 23:25, 28:24, 29:15, 30:11, 30:17, 31:1.

In examining the male-dominated discourse, it is helpful to consider the extent to which the author is urging a movement in thinking and consequent behaviour away from the paternalistic and exploitative patriarchy which is criticised both in the book of Proverbs and by the Hebrew prophets; and which operated in and alongside the Hebrew community. The description of divine Wisdom, by contrast, assigns her honour and respect.

Genesis 1:26–28 identifies man and woman as one humanity with one purpose, and that their life is to be lived in harmony together. The ‘and’ in ‘male and female’, like the ‘and’ in ‘fruitful and multiply’ indicate interaction, inclusion and participation rather than conflict, divergence or separation. The father may be looking towards this reality when encouraging his son to seek wisdom and live accordingly.

Chapters 1 to 9

This first section alternates between the father speaking with his son and descriptions of Wisdom, with a few thoughts about learning from how hard ants work!⁶⁸ The father contrasts wise and foolish men and women. Divine wisdom is depicted as feminine (Proverbs 1:20, 3:14–18, 4:6, 8, 13, 8:1–3, 11, 9:1–4) and contrasts the ‘forbidden woman’ (Proverbs 2:16, 5:3, 20, 7:5 ESV, cf. 9:13). Sons either listen, learn and live, or they ignore, reject and die. As noted, the father includes the son’s mother (Proverbs 1:8, 4:3, 6:20), but there is no explicit mention of daughters (cf. Job 1, 42). These themes assist in understanding the father’s advice and the wisdom his son is to learn.

The father-son conversation involves mentoring and leadership, and while set in the singular, reflects the hopes of the community rather than of one person. The educational aspects of this vision are also evident in its inter-generational essence (Proverbs 4:1–3). In the book of Proverbs, true hearing is referred to as a matter of heart 48 times (14 times in the first nine chapters), mind 22 times (once in this first section), soul 9 times (twice in section 1), and strength 9 times (once in section 1). The way readers receive this father’s advice will naturally be affected by each person’s own experiences of their parents.

‘My son ...’

The term ‘My son ...’ is used 18 times in Proverbs chapters 1 to 7.⁶⁹ The father is with his son. He is speaking to his son about the son’s present and future life. He is urging his son to believe and act in a certain way, and then indicates the benefits from this behaviour. He also warns his son about the dangers involved in other

⁶⁸ See my *Learning to Love Wisdom: Educational, Social and Theological Themes in Proverbs 1 to 9*.

⁶⁹ Proverbs 1:8, 10, 15, 2:1, 3:1, 11, 21, 4:1, 10, 20, 5:1, 7, 20, 6:1, 3, 20, 7:1, 24 ESV. The NRSV mainly uses ‘child’, but while the narrative has implications for daughters as well as sons, it seems primarily directed to his son.

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options. Proverbs 5:18 may imply that his son is already married, and that the conversation is between two adults.

Proverbs chapter 3 contains these two themes, with the father requesting his son to accept his advice:

do not forget my teaching ...
let your heart keep my commandments ...
Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him ...
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
Honour the LORD with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce ...
do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of his reproof ...
do not lose sight of these –
keep sound wisdom and discretion.

The blessings indicated by the father should the son follow his recommendations include:

length of days and years of life ...
peace they will add to you ...
favour and good success ...
[the LORD] will make straight your paths.
healing to your flesh ...
refreshment to your bones.
your barns will be filled with plenty ...
life for your soul ...
you will walk on your way securely ...
your foot will not stumble ...
you will not be afraid ...
your sleep will be sweet ...
the LORD will be your confidence ...
[The LORD] blesses the dwelling of the righteous.
to the humble he gives favour ...
The wise will inherit honour (from Proverbs 3:1–35 ESV).

True wisdom

The familial setting is repeated and emphasised in chapter 4, with specific mention of the father's own parents (cf. Proverbs 1:8, 6:20, where he includes his wife), with a focus on the benefits of obtaining wisdom and insight (Proverbs 4:1–9). If 'the fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10, cf. 1:7, 2:5, 15:33), then the goal, purpose, result or end of wisdom is the benefits outlined. These blessings are described as life itself, in all its fullness (Proverbs 3:2, 16, 18, 22, 4:10, 13, 22, 23, 8:35, 9:11).⁷⁰

Jesus: true Son

The parables, the ethical teaching, including in the Sermon on Mount, and the apocalyptic passages, all build on the Wisdom writings as well as the Law and the Prophets. While the sayings in the middle section of the book of Proverbs have practical moral relevance, they are better understood in the context outlined above. The first and third sections of the book of Proverbs are particularly strong foundations for these Gospel teachings and narratives.⁷¹ Similar developments are evident throughout the rest of the New Testament.

The revelation of the persons of the Son, Father and Spirit, their relationships, and the references to the Word and wisdom, develop and modify themes from Proverbs 1 to 9 and 31. The apostolic witness likewise expands on and interprets these insights in this context.⁷²

Jesus' life and ministry are richly described in terms of his sonship. His baptism is described using the 'my Son' language of Proverbs and Psalms 2:7 (Luke 3:22; cf. Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; cf. John 1:19–24):

and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This testimony is repeated at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35).

⁷⁰ 'length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you' (Proverbs 3:2). 'Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour' (Proverbs 3:16). 'She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed' (Proverbs 3:18). 'they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck' (Proverbs 3:22). 'Hear, my child, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many' (Proverbs 4:10). 'Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life' (Proverbs 4:13). 'For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh' (Proverbs 4:22). 'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life' (Proverbs 4:23). 'For whoever finds me (wisdom) finds life and obtains favour from the LORD' (Proverbs 8:35). 'For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life' (Proverbs 9:11).

⁷¹ For example: The Lord's prayer in Matthew 5:9–13; Luke 11:1–4 and Jesus' teaching about God's giving and his gifts in Luke 11:9–13; Matthew 7:7–11.

⁷² For example: Ephesians 3; Romans 8; and Galatians 3 and 4.

Living in Love and Freedom

His crucifixion is not described as a conflict between Father and Son. His first and last words address his Father in relationally rich, confident and positive language, while the fourth word refers to a God-humanity dislocation, not to a Father-Son one (John 1:1–18, 3:16, 17, 31–36; cf. 1 John 2:1, 2; Revelation 12:10).

When he was in the Temple Jesus declared that the traders and leaders had turned his Father's house into a den of thieves, but at Golgotha he was turning thieves from prodigals to faithful sons and their dens into his Father's house – so making places of death into sanctuaries of the Spirit (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46; John 2:13–22).

He is about humanity participating in his true sonship as God's sons and daughters, not heavy, burdensome discipleship:⁷³

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28–30).

⁷³ 'At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and 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' (Matthew 11:25–27).

Healing for life

John 4:46–5:9

Seven signs

These two of the seven signs both involve healing – one of the son of an official from Capernaum in Galilee, and the other of an invalid at the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem. The immediate benefit of the two healings is obvious, and their significance for John is important. He calls the healing at Cana ‘the second sign’ (John 4:54).

When the Jewish leaders asked Jesus for a sign, he used the metaphor of temple to refer to himself, to his death and resurrection (John 2:13–25). John adds that when ‘he was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing’. To believe ‘in his name’ was to believe he was the Son of God who had come in his Father’s name to do his Father’s works (John 5:43, 10:25). As Son of God, Jesus is the *Lamb of God* for the *whole world*, anointed by the Holy Spirit who descended as a dove and remained on him ‘without measure’ (John 1:29–36, 3:34, 35).

To understand the significance of the two healings is to recognise that John has in mind that God is Father, Son and Spirit, and that Jesus’ humanity is as Son of God. These two revelations provide a lens through which we can see the signs (John 1:1–36), and recognise that just as the signs point to Jesus, so the signs are about those who are helped, not just how they are helped.

Presence: where is he?

The Word ‘who was in the beginning with God’, and who was always, is now, and will forever be God, was present (John 1:1–3). The one who ‘became flesh and dwelt among us’ was there, with them, and for them. They were seeing his ‘glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14; cf. 1 John 1:1ff.).

God was not just up there, out there, or somewhere. He was right there in Jesus, in Cana, once again. He was there when the father came looking for him. It was Jesus’ presence in his own home that the father wanted (John 4:46, 47). After this miracle, Jesus went to the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem, and then to the Temple seeking the healed invalid (John 5:1–6, 14).

The father and the invalid no doubt wondered where God was when they were suffering. The answer is clear: he was present to them, he was with them in their suffering, and he was with them as man. Humanity was with humanity. Jesus was not God with a mask, but Word become flesh, present to an urgent father looking for him (John 4:47) and to an invalid not seeking him or even aware he was present (John 5:6, 10–13). One man had conditional interest (John 4:48), while the other had lived with false hopes (John 5:3, 5–7).

Action: what is he doing?

John provides commentary on what Jesus did: 'He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:10–12). Whether at Cana or at Jerusalem, he was not only present, he was active (cf. John 5:18–47).

His actions were those of one person helping another, actions which are Jesus' signature gift to all humanity. He was doing what he saw as most significant and most fundamental for any human person. He was caring for someone else. He was meeting needs. He was doing something appropriate for those with difficulties (John 4:46, 47, 5:3, 5). He wanted them to be healed and helped for life now, in this world, even though they too would die. He was therefore sanctifying and sanctioning life here, now, and showing how and for whom we are to live. Life here is not just preparation for later, it is to be lived in its fullness (John 10:10).

He was showing us what God thinks of his – of this – creation. He does not ignore it; he participates in it, he understands its cycles of life and death with its frailty and sickness, and he sustains it. His actions in healing the boy and the man re-established health. He knows his creation well and does not look at it through rose-coloured glasses. He built creation with redemption and renewal in mind, and does not redeem and restore because it was poorly or badly designed.

Explanation: what is he saying?

A third key to unlock what Jesus said to the official from Capernaum, and to the man by the Bethesda pool, is in John 1:18. He tells us that 'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known' (ESV) or 'No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him' (NASB). The word 'explained', 'declared', 'revealed' or 'made known' is *exegeomai*. He has exegeted him!

In being present with us, in acting for our welfare, he explains who God is and what God does, and so explains himself as God's explanation! He reveals himself as God's revelation, he declares himself as God's declaration. He makes known that he is one with the Spirit and the Father, and that he never acts alone. He defines true humanity and reveals true divinity!

When he said to the official at Cana that they would not believe without a sign, he was not putting him, or those with him, down. He was simply describing the human predicament and revealing its solution. He was evoking faith in himself, just as when he said to him to 'Go; your son will live' (John 4:50, cf. 53, 54).

His conversation was an enabling and empowering one: the miracle is not so much the miracle; the miracle was seeing God whom no-one can see, knowing God

whom no-one can know, and knowing him as he was present in Jesus. It was this reality that broke in on the man healed at the Bethesda pool. He had gone to the Temple, presumably to give thanks for his healing. Jesus must have expected him to do this and went there to meet him. The healed man innocently told the Jewish leadership that Jesus had healed him, perhaps thinking they would be impressed. Jesus' sign had the opposite effect, as they were caged inside their religious mind-set.

Jesus' comment to him: 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you' (John 5:14) was not saying he had been invalidated by his sin, just that sin brings many problems with it. This conversation reminds us again how important human society and community are to Christ, and that we are to live transformed as the Father's family in the fellowship of the Spirit in the will and purpose of God.

Conclusion

The centurion's family believed. Their son was healed, and a new lease of life was given. The man who had been an invalid for 38 years was worshipping in the Temple, and had a remarkable story to tell. If this is the way God worked in and through Jesus' humanity, then these accounts indicate something of the way God works with all humanity. He is present and active, revealing himself, and he wants us to care for other people by being present to them, and then, as opportunity arises, sharing the richness and glory of his goodness, mercy and grace.

God's promise and Abraham's faith

Galatians 3:1–22

Christ's gift of himself, according to his Father's will

Paul's greeting to the Galatian church is brief and significant. He declares his apostolic credentials as being 'through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead' (Galatians 1:1). The Galatian Christians are offered grace and peace 'from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen' (Galatians 1:3, 4).

Paul's emphasis on Jesus as Messiah, implicitly mentioning the Holy Spirit, and God the Father, who raised Messiah from death, sets the context for his explanation of the gospel. The Father and Christ are working together; everything they do is harmonious, especially the actions of Christ's self-offering and God's resurrection of his Son. Their purpose is clear: they are dealing with sin and delivering humanity from engulfing evil.

Paul's calling and salvation

Paul's conversion is well known, and described here as resulting from the Father setting him apart prior to birth and then graciously calling him: 'he was pleased to reveal his Son [in] me' (Galatians 1:15, 16). The revelation of God's Son to him, or, in him, aligned Paul not only with the Father's Son, but with the Son's relationship with his Father (cf. Galatians 1:3, 4). Paul's radical change – along with those with him – was from attempted works justification to being justified by faith in Jesus Christ. The options were faith or futility (Galatians 2:15, 16).

He saw himself as 'crucified with Christ'. The death of Christ was intensely personal, and was not simply an economic or forensic transaction. Christ offered himself up, and Paul saw himself as having been taken into that self-offering. Paul died with Christ, and was raised with him. His new life was defined by the faithfulness of the Son of God – by Christ's relationship with his Father – and not by Paul's legalistic ambition (Galatians 2:19–21). Rather than self-love, Paul had become the recipient of the love of God's Son (Galatians 1:3, 4), and so of the Father's love (Galatians 4:4–7).

Paul bookends this section with this theme: 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 1:3 and 2:20).

Christ's redemption and the promise of the Spirit

The thought of returning to his violent past held no attraction for Paul, and he resolutely opposed churches he founded, or visited, being overtaken by the kind of legalism he had previously practised. He confronts his readers with two thoughts (Galatians 3:1–3):

- they had seen Jesus Christ ‘publicly exhibited as crucified’; by which we can assume he refers to the content outlined in chapters 1 and 2.
- they had received the Holy Spirit, and known clear evidence of his presence, by believing what they heard.

The mention of the Holy Spirit was not incidental. Jesus was Messiah. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit for his ministry, the result of which was the sending of the Spirit and the anointing of those who put their faith in him as crucified, dead and resurrected Lord. Everything the Galatians knew depended on the Spirit: Christ is known by the Spirit, the Spirit effects and confirms faith and ‘works miracles among you’ (Galatians 3:1–5).

Paul adds more about the life-changing mystery of being crucified with Christ. His focus is on the anointed humanity of Jesus, of Christ knowing the fullness of the Spirit’s blessings as he gave himself up at Golgotha. Paul’s language at this point is careful. He says Christ became ‘a curse for us’ (Galatians 3:13; ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on the tree’ quotes Deuteronomy 21:22, 23). Paul was aware of the problems he originally outlined: our sins and the evil age in which we live. Paul’s message is clear: Christ became a curse: the awful, putrid horror of these problems fully impacted him, and disfigured him as he was crucified for us, and we were crucified with him. No boundaries are mentioned: the total tragedy was borne, the full burden was known, and the complete tyranny of evil was experienced.

The harvest of his dying gift and actual death is remarkable. New life begins not only for him, but he receives the Spirit, as promised by his Father, and we, from him, ‘receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’ (Galatians 3:14). In being crucified with him we are transferred from the place of the curse, the site of the skull, to the home of the blessed, the family of the Father. We are justified and no longer condemned!

The righteous shall live by faith

This is not new news, nor is it stale news: it is good news, as it always has been! Paul traces it back to Abraham, but could have gone back to Abel who no doubt heard the gospel in its initial proclamation from his mother, Eve, the first recorded evangeliser! Paul reminds his readers that Abraham’s belief in God was ‘reckoned to him as righteousness’, and came to him accompanied with a promise that all the nations would be blessed in him. Those who trust God are his descendants and are liberated from the curse (Galatians 3:6–9).

Paul emphasises his contrast between law-works and faith-justification by quoting Habakkuk 2:4 that ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (Galatians 3:6; cf. Romans 1:17). Those who live by faith are liberated from the ‘power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe’. This promised inheritance is explored by Paul in Galatians 4 to 6, and is

aligned with freedom in Christ and the 'hope of righteousness' through the Spirit as faith works through love (Galatians 5:1–6). Adopted as God's children, the fruit of the Spirit grows, with those 'who belong to Christ Jesus [having] crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (Galatians 4:1–7, 5:16–26). Those who sow to the Spirit reap eternal life and do not grow weary in doing good, 'especially to those who are of the household of faith' (Galatians 6:1–10). Central to Paul's theology is the 'cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world', and by which a new creation is founded (Galatians 6:11–16). The 'evil age' (Galatians 1:3) is dismantled and 'a new creation' (Galatians 6:3) is established.

This faith is not arbitrary or without content. It comes through Abraham's offspring (singular), and was not negated by the announcement of the law to the people of God through Moses 'four hundred and thirty years later' (Galatians 3:15–18). The law was given to help manage 'transgressions', was not opposed to God's promises, but could not, of itself, bring life. Life depended on faith in a justifying God, a gracious covenant Father, as revealed to Abraham, as realised in Christ, and as given by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:19–22).

The glorious reality of these promises is summarised in Galatians 3:26–29 where discrimination and exclusion based on religious group, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status are not appropriate for those who 'have put on Christ' and are united in him as Abraham's offspring.

Times of trouble and triumph

Psalms 23

Life is a journey and we are not alone

The psalmist depicts his life as a journey with the LORD. The shepherd provides rest and refreshment. He leads the psalmist ‘beside still waters’ (23:2) and ‘in paths of righteousness’ (23:3), and travels with him through the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ (23:4). The psalmist is confident that ‘goodness and mercy’ will follow him ‘all the days of [his] life’ (23:6). He is provided quiet times in ‘green pastures’ (23:2), refreshment in the presence of his enemies (23:5) and accommodation in the shepherd’s home (23:6). He is led throughout his journey in paths of righteousness and is followed by goodness and mercy. Travellers are not alone. The LORD restores their souls, is with them in the valley, and prepares a feast for them while their enemies watch. The LORD’s house is their ultimate and permanent dwelling.

Restoration

While Psalm 23 is usually illustrated with pictures of lush green pastures and gently flowing streams, the story in the Psalm is about restoration. Three times we read about something other than life being good. Life is difficult, and restoration develops from the comfort provided in the valley to the anointing given after the feast, and then to life in the house of the LORD.

The first phase involves comfort in suffering. There is no fly-over of the valleys that we encounter. The psalmist does not ‘get over’ things, but goes through them. The good shepherd does not bypass the valley, but accompanies travellers in their troubles. He is with them as a companion and co-sufferer, and not as a remote spectator. No-one is left alone, however abandoned they may seem to be. After travelling with them through the valley, the shepherd is then described as being with them in the presence of enemies. This second stage indicates victory, blessing, healing and deliverance. The anointing brings fruitfulness and abundance. The third phase involves security and safety, in the sanctuary provided by the LORD.

Restoration is progressive. The shepherd of the house comforts us in the darkest valleys, anoints and affirms us at a healing, victory banquet-feast, and provides certainty beyond the struggles. His home speaks of his authority and his ministry, and suggests it is a palace-temple, a place of learning and healing.

All that happens to us begins and ends with the provision and covering of our Covenant-God as the good shepherd. The LORD is the one described throughout the Psalms, revealed to Moses and Israel (e.g. Exodus 34:6, 7; Deuteronomy 6:4, 5) and known earlier to Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, and Abraham and Sarah, and their children.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep and protects them from evil. Jesus describes this as the purpose of the Father's love (John 10:17). Jesus does not run away like the hired shepherds do, but aims to give his flock abundant, fruitful lives. The three-fold description of Jesus as shepherd is completed with him as Anointer. Just as Jesus was anointed Messiah, so he anoints with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18, 23:46–48; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 1:21; 1 John 2:20, 27; Revelation 3:18; cf. Acts 1:4, 2:33, 39; John 20:22).

David's enemies

David's battles were with different people in different situations. Those circumstances and leading people profile something of the arenas in which we may experience trouble. Goliath was a foreign enemy, a stranger threatening the people of God. Saul, by contrast, was the leader of the people, and was divinely appointed. He can be thought of as representing those religious, political, sporting and community leaders whose hearts are not aligned with God or appropriate towards those who would normally trust them. Absalom is one of David's sons. He can be thought of as representing those close personal relationships which would often involve significant trust.

A fourth category that can be discerned from David's life relates to Uriah. Uriah was a Hittite and so would normally not be friendly towards David or supportive of his authority. But Uriah was a faithful soldier who was sacrificed by David after David's adultery with Bathsheba. In this case David was his own enemy. He deceived himself and forfeited his integrity.

If Psalm 23 is a genuine Psalm of David, then the restoration described can be thought of as covering all these four situations, as well as those involving other people, including Mephibosheth and Shimei. The Psalm refers to restoration, to suffering and to enemies but not to individual sin or personal evil. While the psalmist's own failures are not explicitly excluded, he has more in mind than his own shortcomings.

The Lord restores forever

The nature of the restoration described in this Psalm, especially given the enemies nominated, is valuable in times of need. It is also pertinent when helping other people. The Psalm does more than describe a sequence. It speaks of a divine presence who achieves his goal by participating in the troubles and triumphs of our lives.

Untouchable: healing humanity

Luke 5:12–16

Jesus and leprosy

Luke wrote two books ‘about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning’ (Acts 1:1). In his second book, Luke records how the early church was criticised for ‘turning the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6). Luke’s record of Christian communities spreading from Jerusalem to Rome is no surprise to readers of his Gospel (Luke 24:44–49; cf. Acts 1:8; Romans 15:22–28 where Paul plans to go to Spain via Rome ‘in the fullness of the blessing of Christ’.)

Luke recorded Mary’s radical and revolutionary song about her Lord and Saviour acting in mercy ‘for those who fear him from generation to generation’, and who ‘has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty’ (Luke 1:46–55). Luke also wrote of John the Baptist’s father singing about ‘being rescued from the hands of our enemies’ (Luke 1:67–79).

Luke described the birth of Jesus in the context of a decree from Caesar Augustus. In contrast, Jesus, as Messiah, brings salvation and peace to those with whom God was pleased (Luke 2:1–15). John the Baptist, in contrast to the Roman government, had urged the nation to be ready for its coming Lord, and to ‘bear fruits worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3:1–22). Whereas John was later locked in prison, the heavens had opened and Jesus was declared Son of God and anointed Messiah at his baptism. Jesus, ‘filled with the Spirit’, was tested in the barren desert before returning to Galilee (Luke 4:1–14).

Jesus’ sermon at Nazareth has Isaiah 61:1ff as its text: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ (Luke 4:15–19). While those who listened to his message were initially impressed, they threw him out of the synagogue when

he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian’ (Luke 4:20–30).

While all the synoptic Gospels include Jesus healing a leper (Luke 5:12–16; Matthew 8:1–4; Mark 1:40–45), Luke implicitly highlights the significance of

Jesus' reference to Elisha not healing any Israelite leper after first describing the deliverance of the man with a demon at Capernaum, the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, and catch of a boatload of fish (Luke 4:31–5:11).

Two choices

The man was 'covered with [or full of] leprosy'. Leprosy was a general term for skin diseases, not just Hanson's Disease. Diagnosis meant exclusion from social activity, with lepers required to live alone outside of the community (cf. Leviticus 13). Lepers were at the bottom of the social order, below slaves who brought economic benefit to their masters. The crowd would have parted like the Red Sea before Moses as this man approached Jesus.⁷⁴ The untouchable man, full of leprosy, did the unthinkable in approaching Jesus. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, did the unthinkable and touched the untouchable (cf. Luke 4:14, 18). Mark 1:41 adds that Jesus was 'moved with pity' in seeing him and hearing his request. The leper's plea was not just personal. On it rested the hopes of the marginalised, the disadvantaged, of those who were discriminated against. Jesus' kingdom would be judged just as nations, including our own, are judged by their treatment of their marginalised, disabled, refugees, indigenous people, women, children and poor; just as Israel was and is judged by its treatment of widows, orphans and strangers; and just as our churches and families are judged (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17–22; Psalm 146; Jeremiah 7:6, 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; cf. Matthew 25:31–46).

Jesus' response to the man's choice to ask Jesus to choose to heal him was clear, immediate and unequivocal: He 'stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him'. Jesus' healing of this leper was important to Jesus himself, as he later affirmed to John the Baptist (Luke 7:18–23). The account of the healing of the ten lepers in Luke 17:12–19 further reinforces how significant Jesus saw his ministry to lepers. Note that the healed leper in Luke 17 who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan, and so was further down the Jewish social order than the leper in Luke 5:12–16!

Jesus' concern for the healed leper in Luke 5 did not stop with healing him. In telling him to be silent, Jesus wanted him and his family and friends to have priestly assurance that he was healed. This meant that the local priest heard the good news of God's kingdom. It may have been this priest who originally designated the man as leprous. Jesus' request for quiet was out of concern for the healed leper, who could not contain his joy at recovering (Mark 1:45)!

The gathering of people to hear Jesus and be cured by him should not be condescendingly dismissed as mere faithless opportunism, nor should the impact

⁷⁴ Jeremy Myers, 'Grace Commentary on Luke 5:12–16,' http://gracecommentary.com/luke-5_12-16/.

on Jesus' ministry be thought of as Jesus' primary concern. It was easy for Jesus to stop the crowds coming to him: ceasing to teach and heal them would have been very effective! Those who crowded around him had genuine needs and were taking a first step on a positive journey. Jesus' recognition of the demands of this ministry is a reminder that he was not a healing automaton (Luke 5:16).

Looking in the mirror

Jesus is not placating an angry Father-God: a holy God was acting to defeat and destroy evil through Jesus. It is this gospel in which we are led and comforted by the Holy Spirit, and in which, as the Father's family, we participate with joy and delight – and suffering. The Spirit of the Lord who led and enabled Jesus to heal this leper has been poured out on all flesh, as promised by God the Father through his Lord, Jesus Christ (Acts 1:1–11, 2:1–47). Those baptised by his Spirit, who belong to his kingdom, and who know his liberating and healing power act with compassion, mercy, justice and truth. Their gospel is the radical, society changing one that Luke describes. It is a gospel that involves participation in all that Jesus continues to do as risen and ascended Lord by the Holy Spirit with his Father's blessing.

What does it mean to examine ourselves as persons, as families, as a church, and as a community, and to speak out and to act against the mistreatment of the disabled, the disadvantaged and the discriminated (cf. Luke 18:9–14, 23:32–43)? While our main problem may be who we see in our mirror, our potential is realised in the person and power of the one whom we mirror, who though clean, became unclean that we who are unclean could be cleansed. The Messiah, the Saviour, who, in touching the untouchable, made himself untouchable, makes the untouchable touchable. This is the great exchange, an exchange which takes us beyond our comfort zones into the lives of others to share our life as the people of God. In identifying with the leper, Jesus relied on God to declare not only the leper clean and holy, but to affirm that Jesus was clean and holy, and righteous in healing this destitute man.

Even death on a cross

Philippians 2:1–11

Put away your daintiness

Anselm, 1033–1109, urged his readers and hearers to

Consider where and what is the strength of thy salvation, occupy yourself in meditating thereon, delight yourself in the contemplation thereof; put away your daintiness, force yourself, give your mind thereto; taste of the goodness of your Redeemer, kindle within yourself the love of the Saviour.⁷⁵

His advice was that ‘the strength of thy salvation, ... the goodness of your Redeemer, ... [and] the love of the Saviour’ were so important that ‘daintiness’ should be ‘put away’.

Jesus: giver not grasper

Jesus is described in this early Christian hymn in ways that contrast Paul’s pre-conversion life and his imprisonment among a ‘crooked and perverse generation’ (Philippians 1:7, 12–14, 29, 30, 2:15). Paul rejects the practice of proclaiming ‘Christ from envy and rivalry’ and leading by seeking one’s ‘own interests, not those of Jesus Christ’ (Philippians 1:15, 27, 28, 2:21).

Jesus, according to Paul, ‘did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped’ (Philippians 2:6). His humanity showed God to be giver and not grasper. He made ‘himself nothing’ and without ‘reputation’ (Philippians 2:7 NRSV, KJV). This outpouring of divinity into humanity did not contradict or contrast divine nature, but confirmed who God is and how he acts – both within himself and towards other people. Jesus was ‘found in human form’, and defined the fullness of human being as serving God by serving humanity without coercive domination or obsequious grovelling. His humility meant he was not humiliated, even though what happened to him was humiliating. The contrast between giving and grasping means that not only did Jesus choose not to grasp at his own divinity, he did not strive to achieve earthly domination. In being ‘obedient to the point of death ...’,

⁷⁵ Anselm, *Devotions, Meditation IV* (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/devotions.iii.vi.html>, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/devotions/>). Anselm later adds: ‘O hidden power! that a Man, hanging upon the Cross should hang up thereon that eternal death which oppressed mankind, that a Man bound to a tree should unbind the world which was made fast to death everlasting! O concealed loftiness! that a Man condemned with robbers should save men who were condemned with devils, that a Man stretched upon the Cross should draw all things unto Himself! O secret might! that one Soul yielded in torment should draw souls innumerable out of hell, that a Man should endure the death of the body, and destroy thereby the death of souls!’

Also, see Adam J. Johnson, ‘Put Away Thy Daintiness,’ <http://www.adamjjohnson.com/put-away-thy-daintiness-a-call-to-meditate-on-christs-atonement/>.

Ibid. *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

he lived relationally in harmony with his divinity and fulfilled his calling among humanity as a human person. These qualities defined his obedience to God, and not to earthly rulers or demonic powers.

The consequences of serving God led to his crucifixion and death. He faced the horror of violent death, and encountered its final collision knowing pain and grief, but without failing his divine calling. He met death as the last catastrophe and as the ultimate curse. He met death head on: there was no shrinking back, no escape sought, no amelioration requested.

Christians in every generation have reflected and meditated on what his death means, especially given that we face death every day as well as at the end of our days. The death of Christ has been understood in four main ways: Jesus identified *with* us, he has acted *for* us, he conquered us and does something *to* us, and he included us and works *by* us. The death of Christ is not limited to *us*, to humanity, but impacts on evil powers, and on the creation.

Jesus' exaltation and glorification

A critical pivot word in Philippians 2:5–11 is 'therefore'. God does not highly exalt Jesus merely because he is his Son, or because God is 'nice', but because of what Jesus did. No other person has ever or can ever encounter and conquer death as he did. His unique service in being crucified cannot and need not be repeated. Ultimately, declared Paul, all humanity – and possibly, by inference, even all spiritual powers and living creatures – will, according to their kind, acknowledge and confess the reality of what occurred at Golgotha.

The full revelation of what Jesus did in his death includes the Father's embrace of him in his life and death. Jesus, being in the form of God, took the form of a slave or bondservant. His post-crucifixion identity and integrity is seen in his new name as exalted Lord and is consequent to and consistent with these two forms. The forms were shaped by his divine being and relationship with the Father, and his name is his Father's confirmation of the cosmic and salvific significance of his death. The forms determine the declared and confessed name. The Father is glorified in the confessions of every tongue, confessions that acknowledge not simply the divine naming of the human Jesus, but the *kenosis* that led to Jesus' *plerosis* and *theosis* as a human person, and the implications of this for all creation.

Defeating death and daintiness

At the commencement of Philippians 2 Paul nominates 'encouragement in Christ, ... comfort from [Father-God's] love, ... participation in the [Holy] Spirit, ... [and] affection and sympathy' as being the basis of joy and harmony in the

community of believers.⁷⁶ Having the ‘same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus’ is the living reality of the death-defeating gift of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).

Freedom from death is a powerful theme in this letter (Philippians 1:20, 2:8, 30 and 3:10) and was no doubt on Paul’s mind as a prisoner (Philippians 1:7, 13, 17). Breaking the chains of death was an imminent as well as an eternal issue (Philippians 1:21–26). The death of Christ confronts and changes human alienation, addiction and affliction. It rejects false accusation and allegation. While Christ liberates humanity from the power, pollution and penalties that sin and evil bring, we await the full removal of the painful presence of these deadly realities in this fallen and seemingly futile and fickle world. We need the assurance and affirmation that comes from the other book-end declaration after this early hymn:

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13).

The life of the people of God is not one of passive, servile and obsequious naivety, but one of active, intelligent and wise service, aware of the hazards, dangers and trials that life brings. Just as Jesus spoke out against the religious leaders of his day from early in his ministry, ‘holding fast to the word of life’ ‘without murmuring or arguing’ does not mean silence about ‘crooked and perverse’ behaviour (Philippians 2:14–16).⁷⁷ Looking ‘to the interests of others’ means acting as Christ acted and living as he lived (Philippians 2:14–16). While it includes experiencing the deadly impacts that this inevitably brings, it also leads to the people of God being full of joy, love, selflessness and humility and to them shining ‘like stars in the world’ both now and on the ‘day of Christ’ (Philippians 2:16).

⁷⁶ The text does not indicate that Paul has the Father’s love in mind and this epistle does not have any other explicit theology of divine love. Paul’s frequent use of the term ‘love of God’ in his other writings suggest that this is a reasonable inference here. Of course, love is characteristic of the Son as the Son of his love, his beloved Son, and of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

⁷⁷ Matthew 5:17–20; Mark 2:1ff; Luke 4:14ff. Also cf. John 2:13ff.

Afraid of God

Genesis 3:1–9

‘I heard the sound of you in the garden’

Genesis chapter three contains the first reference to fear in the Bible. This creation narrative indicates that humanity did not know this kind of fear of God prior to their encounter with serpentine evil. The sound of the LORD God in the garden was familiar to Adam and Eve, yet they did what they were told not to do. The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not to be eaten. The tree was a sign of the evil that would confront them, and a warning that evil would be best defeated by not eating from this tree.

Their failure to resist evil’s seductive accusation was inexplicable. There was nothing about God or in his creation, nor in their relationship with him and creation, that warranted or explained any defiance and disobedience. In the first creation narrative, God had called the completed creation ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31; 3:4–15). The garden of Eden in this second account was a temple-palace for worshipping and serving God. Humanity, as God’s priestly royalty, was to expand Eden to the ends of the earth (Genesis 1:28; 2:10; cf. Hebrews 11:10). To break communion and assert independence was delusional and destructive. This is the LORD’s world and they were his people.

In Genesis chapter four, the narrative moves from Adam to Cain, who after killing his brother Abel, rejected God’s advice and ‘went away from the presence of the LORD’ (Genesis 3:16). Lamech, his descendant, was a murderer, determined to be more brutal than Cain. The peaceful communion of humanity with God is a seemingly long-forgotten memory.

Same Adam: another story

Not only does the LORD God remain present to Adam, not leaving him on his own to his newfound guilt and failure, he speaks to Adam (Genesis 3:8, 9). He does not accuse Adam of anything, but draws out from Adam a statement about Adam’s predicament. The LORD God’s question also implies that God will keep seeking humanity; he will keep asking people where they are, and he will always be ready to communicate with them. He does not come to Adam as a harsh, severe deity, intent on punishment (cf. Genesis 4:24). The LORD God has another agenda for rebellious humanity. Adam was understandably afraid, but God had another story in mind.

Genesis four begins a genealogy with the birth of Cain and Abel, but, after reaching Lamech, ends with a second genealogy mentioning the birth of Seth. A significant shift has occurred, one which is confirmed with the genealogy provided in Genesis 5:1ff. Adam was ‘the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth’. Adam, we are told, had other children, but Cain is

no longer mentioned, and is not described in these terms. The Scriptures define Adam not only by the onslaught of evil that we see in the world around us (Hosea 6:7; Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45; cf. 1 Timothy 2:13), but by his son Seth (1 Chronicles 1:1; Luke 3:38; cf. Jude 14).

Eve had declared that the birth of Seth meant that ‘God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him’ (Genesis 4:25, which mentions all three sons). The birth of a son to Seth – Abel apparently had no children – heralded a time when ‘people began to invoke the name of the LORD’ (Genesis 4:26, the first reference to corporate worship). This sets the context for the dynasty of the people of God in Genesis 5:1ff! Adam was right about Eve being ‘the mother of all living’ (Genesis 3:20). His declaration is consistent with the message the LORD God gave to the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

An awesome and generous God

While Eve is said to have eaten the forbidden fruit first, God speaks to Adam first, ending Adam’s silence. Sin is not described in Romans 5:12–14 as having come into the world through Eve! Adam’s silence, his refusal to confront the serpent, his abdication of his relationship with the LORD God, and his lack of intimacy with Eve may have led to God’s questioning of him.

Not only did God question Adam, God indicated that he would be working in Eve’s offspring. They learnt from God’s conversation with the serpent that one would come who would conquer evil at great cost. God would be found in this battle, working within and with humanity, not against it. It is this narrative that Revelation 12 develops using apocalyptic language. The defeat of the ‘great dragon ... , that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world’ comes at great cost. The people of God defeat him ‘by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death’.

The awesomeness of such divine action is a reminder of the biblical advice that ‘the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 9:10; cf. Proverbs 15:33; Isaiah 11:2, 33:6). There is an appropriate reverence, honour and awe of God, especially of him as Redeemer and Saviour. This fear is very different from seeing him as the harsh, draconian accuser that evil so frequently and seductively depicts him.

The New Testament describes a very different God to one who is sometimes nasty and sometimes pleasant. One example of the way the early church recorded God’s action, and which is consistent with the message of Revelation 12, relates to ideas of propitiation or appeasement.⁷⁸ Far from being something humanity must do to

⁷⁸ See footnote 18.

avert divine accusation or calm heavenly hostility, the New Testament proclaims God's initiative in the human self-giving of Jesus Christ that comes as a freely granted gift expressing God's love, righteousness, grace, mercy and faithfulness. God is not depicted as an accusing and angry Father from whom Jesus saves us, but as the initiator of the gifts humanity receives in and from Christ.

The first letter of John records that 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love' because God 'sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 4:7–19). Jesus is described as working *with* the Father in being the 'atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:1, 2). Their one initiative in the cross of Christ is achieved together, not in an adversarial conflict. Hebrews 2:14–18 adds mercy and faithfulness to John's mention of love and righteousness. Hebrews 4:11–16 assures us that while 'before [God] no creature is hidden', God's throne is one of grace and mercy, adequate for every human situation. The intervention and intercession of Jesus Christ is as a 'great high priest', one who is a 'merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God' and who makes 'a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people'. Romans 3:19–26 describes this sacrifice in terms of a righteousness that justifies by faith as a freely given gift. This is the same justification that the tax gatherer knew after asking for God's mercy (Luke 18:9–14). This atoning sacrifice is not the harsh, brutal amelioration of a hostile, furious God of whom we should be terrified. It is the faithfulness, love, holiness and goodness of God coming to us in grace and mercy to release us from bondage and terror into the justifying awesomeness, righteousness, liberty and generosity of true worship of the living covenant God.⁷⁹

Adam's choice is ours: which story do we believe, the one written by God through the faith-descendants of Seth or the one written by evil which seems so triumphant but is totally defeated and completely doomed by the awesome and generous actions of God in Christ.

⁷⁹ Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel ridicule appeasing the gods of idols (e.g. Isaiah 44 to 48, Jeremiah 2 and 10, and Ezekiel 20). Is there in the New Testament usage of the words sometimes translated propitiation a similar but implicit irony or ridicule of the need for propitious sacrifices to angry deities in other religious settings? Is this one reason why care is required in discussing the way Jesus defeats God's enemies and destroys their infrastructure and activities?

Living in Love and Freedom

Your visitation from God
Luke 19:28–48

Who?

The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots and the Essenes were several of the religious groups in Judaism at the time of Jesus. Other groups included the Herodians, the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Each one had different ways of achieving the common goal of liberation from Roman rule and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel.⁸⁰

The Pharisees dominated the scene and emphasised ritual piety, while the Sadducees were an elite group of political pragmatists who accommodated Greek thinking and gave priority to Temple rituals. The Pharisees accepted the whole of the Hebrew Bible and an accompanying oral tradition while the Sadducees only accepted the Torah and rejected the idea of life after death and these oral traditions. The Jewish leadership were Pharisees or Sadducees and included the High Priest, other priests and Levites. The Scribes were educated men who interpreted and taught the Law, and served the leadership.

Zealots were intensely religious and were opposed to Roman rule. By the time of the fall of Jerusalem, some were dagger-wielding terrorists. The Essenes opposed Temple worship and the annual religious festivals, and lived in a remote desert community near the Dead Sea. They adopted strict dietary laws, and expected God would send a great prophet and a kingly ruler as well as a priestly Messiah. Some scholars think John the Baptist and possibly Jesus may have originally had contact with them.

Jesus of Nazareth led a different group which included people from Galilee as well as other parts of Judea. He accepted women, outcasts and marginalised people, as well as those from regular male-privileged society.

Where?

Jesus entered Jerusalem coming from Bethany to Bethphage near the Mount of Olives, and then past the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 21:1ff; Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29).⁸¹ The Kidron Valley lies between the Mount of Olives and the Jerusalem Temple Mount.

⁸⁰ Mitchell G. Bard, 'Ancient Jewish History: Pharisees, Sadducees & Essenes,' http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/History/sadducees_pharisees_essenes.html;

Felix Just, 'Jewish Groups at the Time of Jesus,' http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jewish_Groups.htm.

⁸¹ Mark 11:1 and Luke 19:29 list Bethphage before Bethany, in the opposite order for coming from Jericho (cf. Matthew 20:29; Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35, 19:1, 11, 28). Matthew 21:1 mentions Jesus coming to Bethphage while John 12:1 has Jesus in Bethany.

When?

Jesus enters Jerusalem before the Passover and festival of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 26:2, 17–19; Mark 14:1–16; Luke 22:1–15; John 11:55, 12:1, 13:1, 18:28, 39, 19:14).

The Passover celebrates the Exodus and the formation of their national identity under Moses. The Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles were the three central pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple in Judaism.⁸²

Why?

In Matthew 21:1–11 Jesus rides on a borrowed donkey (cf. Zechariah 9:9), with supporters saying he was a Galilean prophet and calling out Hosanna, or God saves, from Psalm 118:24ff. Matthew then refers to Isaiah 56:7 when describing Jesus cleansing the temple, while Jesus uses Psalm 8 in rebuking the chief priests and the scribes.⁸³

Mark 11:1ff describes Jesus going into the temple after arriving at Jerusalem. He adds that ‘when [Jesus] had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve’ (Mark 11:11). There was no royal welcome by the Temple leadership for a king riding a borrowed donkey while receiving popular acclaim from those associated with *this* ruler!⁸⁴

Far from being focused on the adulation of the crowd or even on his own coming betrayal and crucifixion, Luke 19:41–44 records Jesus weeping over Jerusalem, and lamenting that the people did not recognise ‘the things that make for peace ... [and] the time of your visitation from God’ (Luke 19:41–44). Luke further develops this theme when describing Jesus’ forced walk to his crucifixion with Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus’ cross. Jesus tells the women not to weep for him but for themselves, ‘For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’ (Luke 23:26–31). Their blindness was preventing them seeing the time ahead when Jerusalem would be overthrown and the Temple demolished.

⁸² Felix Just, ‘Biblical Pilgrimage Festivals and Major Feast Days of Ancient Israel and Modern Judaism,’ <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Festivals.htm> has Passover and Unleavened Bread in March/April, Pentecost in May/June, Booths in Sept/Oct.

‘Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles in the Jewish and Christian Traditions,’ Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel, http://www.catholic.co.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10566:passover-pentecost-and-tabernacles-in-the-jewish-and-christian-traditions&catid=35&Itemid=141&lang=en.

John J. Parsons, *The Jewish Holidays* (<http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/holidays.html>).

⁸³ Matthew, like Luke, has Jesus cleansing the Temple on arriving in Jerusalem (contrary to Mark), and before he went to stay at Bethany. According to Matthew, Jesus cursed the fig tree on the following day (the same as Mark).

⁸⁴ Mark records that Jesus cursed the fig tree on his way to Jerusalem before cleansing the Temple on the day after his entry into Jerusalem.

John's Gospel has Jesus staying with Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany before going to Jerusalem (John 12:1ff).⁸⁵ John also quotes Psalm 118 and Zechariah 9 about Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem. The triumphal entry in John's Gospel comes after Lazarus' resurrection and the chief priests' intention to kill Lazarus and Jesus.

John 12:20–43 explains that Jesus believed he was like a grain of wheat dying in order that his death would bring a great harvest. This fruitfulness would be his glory, and those who serve him would follow him and be honoured by his Father. His crucifixion would bring judgement to the world-system, the end of Satanic rule, and the gathering of humanity under his lordship. John uses Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 6 to comment that the contest between light and darkness involving the Pharisees was between divine glory and human shame.

Jesus' focus is on the spiritual and political realities that were ahead for the Jewish people, and for other nations. These priorities were more important to him than his own life or the adulation and expectation of his followers (Matthew 21:9–11; John 12:12–19; cf. Psalm 118). His prophetic testimony was only understood after his resurrection.

Jesus' teaching, parables and dialogue in the days after his arrival further elaborate these priorities, and his purpose for being there.

What?

In coming into Jerusalem on the donkey, Jesus was giving a symbolic commentary and critique of the factions in Judaism:

- He was, in effect, saying to the Essenes that they should not retreat to the desert: he was *coming* to Jerusalem.
- To the Zealots, he was indicating that he was against violent revolution and insurrection: he was coming *on a donkey with the people waving palm branches*.⁸⁶
- His entry did not involve the political intrigue of the Sadducees: *he accessed a borrowed donkey-colt that had never been ridden*.
- Nor did his entry align with the Pharisees' moral crusading piety: *the spontaneous worship of his disciples in the streets* was not aligned with their

⁸⁵ Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 have Jesus in the house of Simon the Leper when 'a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table' (Matthew 26:7).

⁸⁶ Exodus 15:27 and Number 33:9 describe the Israelites coming to Elim during their Exodus. Leviticus 23:40 records how the people were to use palm and other branches during the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. Solomon's Temple had carved palm trees in its walls (1 Kings 6:29–35, 2 Chronicles 28:15), while Ezekiel envisioned a new Temple similarly adorned with palm trees (Ezekiel 40:16–41:25). In Revelation 7:9, people from 'every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, [are] standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands'.

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rituals and regulations. After all, his disciples included women, outcasts and people with immoral histories. The Pharisees did not accept the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee (Matthew 21:10)

Jesus was heralding a completely different kingdom in his death. He was indicating what kind of visitations we should be looking for after his death. He *is* coming, and coming in the *now*! He is coming *humbly*, without pretense. His politics involves social as well as personal *compassion, comfort and care*. The worship he brings to the Temple is for *all nations, for all social and economic classes, for all religious groups, and for women as well as men!*

Reflections

Covenant relationships and creation narratives

Covenant promises

Several ideas relating to the nature and purpose of humanity are stated in the Genesis creation narratives. While these accounts do not explicitly use the word covenant, they pre-empt elements relating to the covenants that follow. The Noahic and Abrahamic covenants speak of God's redemptive purposes, and anticipate the ultimate fulfilment God has for creation. God's promised restoration and renewal of creation and humanity is aligned with and achieved in ways consistent with God's creational activity. If restoration is understood this way, a further question is whether the creation itself is built and sustained by God with restoration and destiny always in mind. In other words, does God's creation express God's own character and intent as redeemer, as well as redemption expressing God's being and purpose as creator? If redemption is built on creational lines, is creation itself built on redemptional lines?

It is idle to speculate whether, had there been no sin, the plan of the universe would have included an Incarnation or not. Had this been different, everything else would have been different also. What we do know is, in that the infinite possibilities of things, God has chosen to create a universe into which it was foreseen that sin would enter; and the Incarnation is a part of the plan of such a creation. This being so, it may very well be conceived that the Incarnation was the pivot on which everything else in this plan of creation was made to turn. To state my view in a sentence – God's plan is one; Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world; and even creation itself is built up on Redemption lines.⁸⁷

Is redemption then more than God mopping up a faulty and failed creation now operating at second best, or even worse? In not rationalising or explaining away any of the horror and tragedy of sin, was the fall an unexpected surprise to God? If grace and mercy are God's loving, holy and righteous actions in dealing with sin, are they best thought of as expressions of the ongoing faithfulness of God's love and holiness towards humanity including when goodness and faithfulness prosper? If this is the case, then we do well to meditate on the richness of God's unfailing and unceasing goodness and generosity to all he has made, while humbly aware of the paradoxes involved because of evil and wickedness in God's world.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ James Orr, *Christian View of the World* (New York, USA: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/orr/view.html>, 1908), 232.

⁸⁸ A *happy fault* or *felix culpa* ('For God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist': Augustine, *Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. Albert C. Outler (http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/augustine_enchiridion_02_trans.htm), Chapter VIII, 27).

Human being and purpose

The two Genesis creation narratives teach that humanity is created in God's likeness and image to share a life-journey as male and female always together and never apart from one another. Humanity is described as steward of and servant to the creation, having true dominion by acting with the same creative and restorative care that God does in making, sustaining and renewing creation and humanity. Just as God gave, and continues to give, form and fullness to his universe, so humanity is called to care for and nurture creation with strength of purpose and viability of action. God's sabbatical rest is the climax of his creational expression and the context in which these things now occur. The original garden and the ultimate city function as sanctuaries and palaces where God is present to his priest-king family and where he speaks prophetically to them.⁸⁹

Humanity, reflecting God as God's image, accesses creational resources to heal, sustain and enrich life. In this way humanity responds to its inner hope for creativity and renewal. There are many encouragements in seeing creation from the viewpoint of redemptional provision and intent as well as thinking of redemption as God's initiative to recover and renew creation and humanity.

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;
and by thy great mercy defend us
from all perils and dangers of this night;
for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.⁹⁰

'O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer! Most blessed of all nights, chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead!' 'Easter Proclamation (Exsultet),' Catholic Online, <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=641>.

⁸⁹ Jaques Ellul, *Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972); *Meaning of the City, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

⁹⁰ *Book of Common Prayer*, (The Church of England, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer.aspx>).

Galatians 1 to 3

Background themes

Relationships

- What can we learn about the *persons* of the Father, Son and Spirit and about their *relationships*?
- What can we learn about Jesus' divine and human relationships from his titles (e.g. Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God)?
- What can we learn about human relationships from our understanding of the Trinity and the incarnation?

Freedom and sovereignty

- What does the kingdom of God mean in *relational* and *narrative* terms?
- What *relational* and *pastoral* perspectives can we learn regarding divine freedom/sovereignty, and human freedom/responsibility?
- How can these perspectives change our understanding of freewill, determinism, predestination, fore-knowledge, election and universalism from abstract concepts into living truths?

Atonement

- What do the death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit by Jesus as Messiah mean in *relational* terms?
- What *personal* and *relational* significance does the use of 'with', 'in', 'for', 'by', 'to' etc. have related to the cross-events?
- What do the words of Jesus on the cross tell us about *relationships* and *restoration*?
- In what ways do the post-resurrection Gospel descriptions (with Acts 1-2) provide a lens to understand the Christ-event the Gospels record?

Relationships, freedom/sovereignty and Atonement together

- What gender, ethnic and socio-economic identities and relationships are understood by seeing humanity as the image of God?
- What do these themes mean for the different faith approaches adopted by the church, including
 - Conversion, discipleship and evangelism?
 - Social justice, environment and welfare?
 - Scripture, prayer, liturgy and devotion?
- How do these understandings affect our views of conviction, repentance, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution?

Creation

- What biblical cosmology and eschatology best informs these understandings?
- What does it mean to be the household of God in this creation, given the 'evil age' in which we live?
- What perspectives are evident about the relationship between creation and redemption?

Passages

Galatians 1:1–4

- What is the connection between the Father raising Jesus from the dead and Jesus giving himself for our sins? To whom or what did Jesus give himself?
- What does Paul mean when he says that Jesus gave himself 'according to the will of our God and Father'?
- Why does Paul twice use 'Christ' when referring to Jesus in these verses, and four more times in the next group of verses?
- What is evil about this present age? Is there anything good about this age?

Galatians 1:8, 9

- What does Paul mean when he says, 'let that one be accursed'? Who does the cursing?

Galatians 1:16

- Why does Paul say that it is 'his Son' and not 'Christ' who is revealed in him?
- Why 'in' him and not 'to' him?

Galatians 2:4

- What is the 'freedom we have in Christ Jesus'?

Galatians 2:6

- How did Paul's view that God shows no partiality affect his pastoral practice regarding gender, ethnicity and social class – including his views of eligibility for ministry?

Galatians 2:15–21

- Why contrast 'the works of the law' and faith?

Living in Love and Freedom

- If a person is justified ‘through faith in Jesus Christ’, and so by believing ‘in Christ Jesus’, who is Christ Jesus and what has he done that warranted this faith/belief?
- Are humans worthless because they need another to save them? Does it denigrate a person to tell them that they can’t save themselves, and need another person’s help?
- What does it mean to be crucified *with* Christ, and have Christ live *in* us? How does this differ from Christ dying *for* us?
- Why does Paul change language from ‘Christ’ to ‘Son of God’?
- What does Paul mean when he says that Christ ‘loved me’?
- To whom did Christ give himself when he gave ‘himself for me’?
- What is the purpose of Christ’s death?

Galatians 3:1–22

- In what ways did Paul publicly portray Jesus Christ as crucified?
- What connections is Paul making between the cross of Christ, receiving the Spirit (beginning by the Spirit), and hearing by faith?
- Who supplies the Spirit, and on what basis?
- What miracles does Paul have in mind? Why doesn’t he mention anything in this epistle that would be commonly considered to be miraculous?
- What is the connection between
 - the law and faith?
 - the flesh and the Spirit?
 - curses and blessings?
- How do promises, inheritances, justification and righteousness relate to these connections? And transgression, sin, imprisonment? Are these relational terms or forensic ones, or both?
- What does Paul mean by saying ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse’ rather than Christ ‘was cursed for us’?
- How did Christ become ‘curse for us’? Why use the name Christ and not Son or Jesus?
- What does it mean to be in Christ Jesus?
- Given that God’s primary attributes are love, holiness, goodness, righteousness and truth, in what ways are we to understand wrath and cursing, and how does this understanding inform our awareness of human anger and associated dispositions?

Living in Love and Freedom

- To whom is the Spirit promised? How (relationally) is the Spirit given?

Galatians 3:15–29

- What does it mean to consider these things in covenant terms?
- What is ‘the promise through faith in Jesus Christ’?
- What does it mean that we are ‘all children of God’?
- What does it mean for our understanding of the Christian life and of ministry that we are ‘in Christ Jesus’ and live ‘through faith’?
- How does this connect with being ‘baptized into Christ’ and putting ‘on Christ’? How are the terms in the last two questions to be understood in *relational* terms?
- What barriers is Paul wanting to pull down in 3:28? In what ways are the church and society resistant to dismantling these obstacles? What other passages are often used to ‘balance’ or ‘re-position’ or ‘limit’ this verse?
- What does it mean to be ‘one in Christ Jesus’? Is this new identity what it means to be ‘heirs according to promise’ or is our inheritance something else? Can this unity now be defined to exclude full participation in the ministries of the church on the basis of race, ecclesiastical designation, social and economic status, and gender?

Meditation on prayer

I am thankful for the ancient saint, Irenaeus, who wrote of the Son and the Holy Spirit as the two hands of God.⁹¹ His metaphor reminds me that the Son and the Holy Spirit work *with* the Father, and that our adversary is the evil one, not the Father, who requires no convincing about our circumstances or need of God's grace and mercy. 1 John 2:1, 2 speaks to me not of a hostile Father, placated by a loving Son, but of our heavenly Father, working together with his Son for the welfare of humanity and the whole creation (cf. 1 Peter 5:8, Revelation 12:9, 10, Matthew 5:13).

As John 1:14 and 18 indicate, the Son of God, the Word who became flesh, is 'close to the Father's heart'. He became human in order that humanity might be God's sons and daughters and 'may become participants of the divine nature' (John 1:10-13; cf. 2 Peter 1:4). Some years ago, I heard James Torrance speak of Jesus' priesthood. As I recall, he spoke of binary thinking about God in heaven and of us on earth, and that this duality was not fully Trinitarian.⁹² In this context he cited Jesus' prayer for Peter, 'I have prayed for you ...' (Luke 22:32), and reminded us that Jesus did not so much pray that Peter would not fail, but that his faith would not fail. All our prayers are in Jesus who prays for us as High Priest (Hebrews 2:13, 4:14-16). It is this understanding of the immanent yet transcendent Jesus that sustains me when I feel faithless, prayer-less and overwhelmed.

I find encouragement in knowing that his human, priestly prayers for us are not alone. He has received the Holy Spirit without measure (John 3:34, 35). Otherwise he could not be the Lamb who removes the world's sin (John 1:36). The Spirit he sends is firstly the Spirit he has been given. The promise of the Spirit is a double promise, firstly for him to receive and secondly for him to send (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 2:33). When Jesus spoke of sending the Comforter-Advocate, he assured his hearers that the Holy Spirit would 'testify on [his] behalf' (John 15:26). The truth into which we are led is that the Spirit who was with the disciples in Jesus would be in us, speaking of what he hears, and declaring to us the things that are ahead (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13). There is much more about the Spirit's work which flows from and relates to this (1 Corinthians 2:6-16; 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:7; Romans 8:22-28)! Our heavenly Father embraces us in his transforming holiness and love and shares with us something of the Spirit's harvest in those whose hope is in the risen and ascended Lord.

⁹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm>), Book V, Chapter 6.

⁹² James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996).

Love, truth and 1 John 4:17–21

... whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the **love** of God has reached perfection (1 John 2:5).

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in **truth** and action. And by this we will know that we are from the **truth** and will reassure our hearts before him (1 John 3:18, 19).

Since love and truth are deeply inter-connected in 1 John, perhaps 1 John 4:17–21 can be seen as saying something rich and powerful about truth as well as about love.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in **love**, but perfect **love** casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in **love**. We **love** because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I **love** God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not **love** a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot **love** God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who **love** God must **love** their brothers and sisters also.

The truth has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in **telling the truth**, but perfect **truth telling** casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in **telling the truth**. We **tell the truth** because he first **told us the truth**. Those who say, 'I **tell the truth about** God,' and **lie about** their brothers or sisters, are **haters and not lovers**; for those who do not **tell the truth about** a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot **be telling the truth about** God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who **want to be truthful witnesses to** God must **tell the truth about** their brothers and sisters also.

(Bold emphasis is mine.)

God abandoned, humanity betrayed

Abandonment is a theme in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels. Was Jesus abandoned, and, if so, who abandoned him? Did God abandon Jesus? God did not save him from the cross: there was no miraculous intervention in Gethsemane, during his trial, or on the way to death. Nothing happened to avert his crucifixion. No one saved him from the inundation of murderous hate, no blood-stained door lintels kept death away, no river opened up for him to cross, no angelic revelation came to help him (after Gethsemane), no pebble slew the ogres who opposed him, and no one shut the mouths of lions roaring against him or was seen standing with him in the fiery furnace of torment and torture. Generations of God's people had sung that 'the LORD is a warrior', but this anthem was not heard at Golgotha (Exodus 15:3). Calvary was a very different place to the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah were absent, and no heavenly voice affirmed him as his Son. Instead of hearing words of divine comfort and assurance, he was mocked for allegedly calling for Elijah. As he hung in afternoon darkness, he was in some real sense God abandoned, humanity betrayed.

If Jesus was not fully human and experienced less than this abandonment, then victims of holocausts, torture, violent atrocities, predatory intrusions and evil invasions might find little reason for comfort in the death of a Jewish prophet, preacher and mystic. How could this one be a saviour or deliverer, if any notion of his sacrifice is only tokenistic and symbolic?

Some read his Gethsemane prayer not as a request to be saved from crucifixion, but as an answered request that he not die then and there in the garden under the weight of knowing the agony ahead. Either way, God did not save him from the cross. As the mockers reminded him and others present, nothing happened to bring him down from the cross. No one can know the immense spiritual, mental, emotional and physical torture he experienced in being crucified as Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah and Lord – as 'King of the Jews'. Jesus must have experienced confusion, uncertainty, bewilderment, alienation and despair – the lamentable loss of communion that humanity knows in divine silence. If his suffering was not real, then God is exposed as indifferent to us and mocks us with the death of Jesus, and humanity is left bearing the despair of killing the most perfect person who walked its streets.

Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus understood himself as a ransom for many. By his death, the religious and political establishment, and the demonic powers, took what they demanded but had no legitimate right to claim. He suffered from an unfair and immoral verdict. Is Jesus' abandonment then God's total identification with the most vulnerable, violated, and viciously treated? Does Jesus' crucifixion therefore expose the utter evil of every act against human dignity and decency, and so extinguish the power and poison of death by experiencing despicable death and darkness as a human person?

There is a further question. Did God know abandonment in himself, or is God remote, removed and impassive to human misery? The apostle Paul wrote that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19). How are we to understand the Father's delight in his Son and the Spirit's descent on Jesus when reading of Jesus in Gethsemane, at his trial, on the road to Golgotha, and in his crucifixion and death? Is there any possibility that in the abandonment of Jesus, the triune God acted in unity and 'abandoned' God's self in Christ to the darkest evil humanity ever knows? Is there any truth that he did this for us, and that through this act God remains himself, but humanity's history and destiny is forever changed? Is there truth in Father-God never being accuser and forever being redeemer? Is this what the author of Revelation means in writing 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God' (Revelation 12:10)?

Another thought. If God is loving, good, righteous, true and holy, without imperfection, inconsistency or variation, then what is God's response to that which is completely contrary to God's own person? Is it possible that the 'wrath of God' is best understood as God's self-giving, self-denying, self-emptying 'abandonment' in the cross of Christ where, under the full weight of vile accusation, Jesus does not grasp at his own status, and so reveals God's true self at that time and in that place? Is the 'wrath of God', rather than violence from the Father to his beloved Son, or to anyone at all, the reconciling and peaceful action of perfect love, goodness, righteousness, truth and holiness? Does the abandonment of Jesus speak a better word than the blood of Abel and countless others precisely because in it God's intentional and utter disapproval of evil – God's 'wrath' – is revealed as his immeasurable mercy and grace coming in kindness and peace?

Perhaps it is helpful to find fresh ways of expressing the confrontation of Calvary between evil's demonic, sinister, perverse, rationalised irrationality and God's transcendent glory and majesty in his beloved Word by his divine Spirit. Perhaps there is some sense in Charles Wesley's hymn:⁹³

Died he for me who caused his pain,
for me, who him to death pursued.
Amazing love!
How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Perhaps the abandonment crisis depicted in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels can lead us towards true liberty and freedom:

⁹³ Charles Wesley, 'And Can It Be That I Should Gain,'
https://hymnary.org/text/and_can_it_be_that_i_should_gain

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My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Perhaps, then, the eternal God was not so much external to the cross, but in the mystery of holy love, was present at the time of crucifixion and abandonment.⁹⁴ The abandonment of which Jesus spoke and which he suffered was in this sense somehow known to, in and by God with us and for us. Perhaps the heavenly silence speaks a final word of divine affirmation and intention to rebellious humanity by offering a pathway to resurrection life through Jesus' crucifixion and death.⁹⁵ Perhaps it is preferable to sing of God's love being glorified rather than God's wrath being satisfied (John 12:23ff, 13:1ff, 17:1ff).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ The contrasting emphasis on holiness in Reginald Heber's famous hymn, *Holy, Holy Holy*, and Geoffrey Bingham's *Holy! Holy! Holy!* is informative of the benefit of understanding God's holiness as being redemptive as well as eternal, ineffable and perfect. See *New Creation Hymn Book*, 334 and 349.

⁹⁵ cf. John Colwell, *Why Have You Forsaken Me?: A Personal Reflection on the Experience of Desolation* (Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, UK: Paternoster Press, 2009); James Denney, *Death of Christ, The* (New Canaan, Connecticut, USA: Keats Publishing, 1981); P. T. Forsyth, *Cruciality of the Cross, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1984); *Work of Christ, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1993); Colin E. Gunton, *Actuality of Atonement, The* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1994); John R. W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Epistles of John* (London, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974); *Cross of Christ, The* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989); Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross* (Eugene, Oregon, USA: Cascade Books, 2012); *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco, USA: Metanoia Books, 2014); Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, Tennessee, USA: Abingdon Press, 2007); C. F. D. Moule, *Christ Alive and at Large: Unpublished Writings of C. F. D. Moule*, ed. Robert Morgan and Patrick Moule, Canterbury Studies in Spiritual Theology (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2010); D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 1968); Leon Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965); *Cross in the New Testament, The* (Exeter, Devon, UK: Paternoster Press, 1979); *Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance, The* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983); *Cross of Jesus, The* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989); Johnson, *Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed*; Mark D. Baker, ed. *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Baker Academic, 2006); Mark D. Baker; Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2011); Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1987); *Wrath of Love, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 2004).

⁹⁶ cf. Stuart Townend, 'In Christ Alone,' <https://www.stuarttownend.co.uk/song/in-christ-alone/>.

The Ten Commandments and Christology

The Ten Commandments anticipate a flourishing community living in the blessings of God. The commandments include instruction and promise, for their fulfilment is to come by God's mercy and grace.

The Exodus commandments are more than edicts or decrees creating obligation. They are instructions, educative of a divine purpose (cf. Romans 2). While there are obvious consequences for falling away from divine action and being, care is needed about framing the goodness and kindness Paul refers to in Romans 2 alongside pugilistic vengeance. John's Gospel has a well-recognised tension between the family of God – who are not left as orphans, but given the same Spirit as Messiah, who as glorified, resurrected Lord, fulfils his word by breathing on them in the upper room, and by going ahead of them into Galilee – and the universalism suggestive in John about God's love for the world and so for all humanity. Both perspectives enrich a biblical understanding of the grace anticipated in the giving of the law (cf. John 1:16–18).

The law is relational and teleological. Israel was brought out of Egypt on 'eagles' wings ... to myself' (Exodus 19:4). Paul speaks of the legalism that comes from separating law from 'myself', from a *theosis* where we 'become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4; 1 Peter 1:8). To participate in this way is surely to know Christ as the Word of God in the fullness of the Spirit of God (John 1:1ff, 3:36, 7:37 etc.). This is divine commandment working as life-giving and creation renewing. Hence the commandment 'you shall ...' is not something we are left to do by copying a stereotype, but free to participate in as a promise. The 'you shall ...' of the law speaks of a destination and makes a prophecy. The God who began the Exodus will complete the nation's Arrival in the Land of Promise (cf. Philippians 1:6). The covenant God who rescued Israel will ultimately establish his people forever, and Edenise his creation (cf. Exodus 33, 34).

When Jesus speaks of commandments he is focused, intentional and deliberate. Something is happening. Something has been happening. Something will happen. The implication is not to mess around or waste time. Commands emphasise end-objectives. They focus on reaching the goal and envision how or where things end up.

Those who love Jesus, love the Father whom Jesus loves, and live in the love of the Spirit of the love of the Father and the Son. This means they live without being burdened or coerced; they naturally and freely keep God's commandments as a matter of delight.

There are a large number of New Testament references to the substance of each of the ten commandments. A few of these are:

1. God is One: Ephesians 4:5, 6; 1 Corinthians 8:6, 12:1ff.; John 10:30.

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2. Imaging God's being: Colossians 1:15ff.
3. Honouring God's name: Philippians 2:5–11.
4. Keeping God's sabbath rest: Hebrews 4; Matthew 11:25ff.
5. Honouring family: Ephesians 3:14–21.
6. Sanctifying life: John 1:1–18, 10:1–18, 14:1–6, 17:1ff; 1 John 1.
7. Marital fidelity: Revelation 19:1–10, 21:1–22:5; cf. John 3:29ff; Matthew 22:1ff, 25:1ff.
8. Giving generously: 2 Corinthians 8:9; James 1:16–18; John 3:16; Romans 8:31ff.
9. Witnessing faithfully: John 1:1–18, 5:31ff, 8:13ff; Revelation 1:2, 12:12ff, 19:20, 20:4.
10. Living abundantly: 2 Peter 1; 1 Peter 1:1–2:12; 1 John 2:12–17; 2 Corinthians 4:1–7; Luke 11:1–13; Matthew 6:19–34, 7:7–11; Philippians 4.

Qoheleth on in-between moments

I think Qoheleth is taking us on a journey about ways of thinking, and that he is alright in himself – as much as any of us ever are. He opens up vistas into his thinking about why absurdity and futility continually face us. He invites us to explore beauty within the seasons God gives, and to discern perspectives about our lives and life in general. He wants us to understand something deeper about the transience of everyday life and the permanence of eternity. The enjoyment that comes to us in the moments in-between can increase our confidence that God is faithful in realising the destiny he weaves for us and for his creation.⁹⁷

Qoheleth seems to be writing something of a commentary on Genesis chapters two and three. He explores what it means to have God-given glimpses or tastes of the tree of life and its fruit when we have already eaten of the tawdry produce of tree of death. This suggests that the author of Ecclesiastes chapter three is neither angry, nor cynical, nor sentimental, but is celebrating rather than despairing of life in God's world with all of the conundrums that face us as mortal persons. It may help explain Qoheleth's comment that God 'has put a sense of past and future into [our] minds, yet [we] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end'. It may help us better appreciate and treasure the 'appropriate' or 'beautiful' seasons of life we are given.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Some further reading: Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2000), Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), Geoffrey Bingham, *Wisdom of Koheleth, The* (Blackwood, SA: New Creation Publications, 1990), and Boase and Frechette, *Bible through the Lens of Trauma*.

⁹⁸ In May 2017, well after writing these thoughts and *Beauty, in and in between*, we attended an exhibition at the South Australian Art Gallery entitled *Memento Mori*. The explanatory text was insightful:

From the moment we are born, the only certainty in life is death. The idea of art as a *memento mori* (Latin meaning 'be mindful of death') dates back to antiquity and profoundly influenced Christian art forms as well as the art of other religions.

The subject of death appears in Christian devotional images for the home and church as well as even in the symbolism of nature's transience depicted in domestic still-life paintings. Likewise, our concern with death has inspired a rich legacy of funerary art, often commemorating grave sites with the theme of life's passing.

Through art we are reminded of the fragility and vulnerability of life. The painter and sculptors' depiction of mortality is a meditation upon the essence of existence.

Beauty, in and in between
Ecclesiastes 3

When I speak my mind
some say I am a cynic
a fatalist
a pessimist
a god-mocker, despiser.
Others say I am irritated
annoyed
upset
twisted
downcast and depressed.
I am not an empty dreamer
or wishful thinker
or disappointed idealist
but a realist.
Beauty is what I look to see
everywhere
in all seasons
in each moment
bursting into life in good times and bad
in summer and winter
early in life and at its close
in building and leaving
when finding or losing.
Not all is beautiful it seems
but that is where God speaks
to share his heart and mind
and draw us away from
flatness and floundering
to look beyond
and above
to realise the height and depths and breadth
of the eternity
he has placed in our hearts
and to see that he works all things
for the good of his creatures
even the ugly and tawdry and wrong
which he plans to reverse and restore
and refine
to bring to renewal
and glory divine.

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He is eternal and we are not.
He knows the times and we do not –
for him every season
has its moment
its puff of wind and purpose
its aim and activity
and what he does with each breath remains
and lasts
and does so forever.
So, what is for humanity
but to participate in his life-gift
in his creation
by being
who we are and will be
doing the tasks
at the times and places
he gives us
knowing that
all that seems pointless
under the sun
is valued by One
above the heavens.
Ah, yes, I am the speaker
the listener
the watcher
who sees beauty in birth
and speaks wonder
when sorrows of death
close days on this earth.
I am the voice
who shares joy in the planting
and delight in the reaping
who looks for the beauty
when all is achieved.
I am the one who
treasures the healing
building and dancing
who warms to embrace
and weave all together
who loves to see love
and who longs for real peace
who hopes that true beauty
might end futile murder

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and pointless decay.
Who wants to bring comfort to mourning
and mending to tearing
and calmness to war
so that each new day
humans together
can joy at the beauty
of God and the seasons
he weaves for his purposes
in mysteries that fill us with
awe
wonder
amazement
worship
delight
glory and beauty.
Beauty in and in between
in every season
with its times and events
reinforcing
reversing
refreshing
restoring
ready for
forever adoring
Creator Redeemer Divine.

His hour had come ...

Social, educational and theological frameworks

Organisations, communities and those who are in them all look to some form of positive future hope beyond blind optimism. Implicit and explicit vision statements are fundamentally about who they are and why they exist. It is about their *ubuntu*, their social and biological kinship inter-connections. It expresses something of the way we are people with and through other people. These vision statements lead to priorities, purposes and policies, which are also expressed in various tacit and overt forms. Vision identifies mission. It expresses the goals and targets of a social group, which, in turn, produce the 'how', the actual social economics and ecology of daily life and inter-personal communication and interaction.

This cultural framework is not merely formulaic, but expresses the owned belief systems in relational, organic and interactive ways. In other words, the values within identified and unspoken strategic frameworks are relevant not only at operational and performance levels, but are essential to the hierarchical relationships that leaders and facilitators have with those who are connected to them.

The way these issues are seen as relevant in social and educational contexts can help identify how they are able to assist in theological reflection, hermeneutical considerations and ministry practices. The opposite is also true: theological understandings and applications offer insights to community, commercial, religious, social and educational leadership contexts.

A reading of John 13 to 17 invites reflection on the author's vision in writing his Gospel, on his 'who-why' understandings. For example, one issue is about what can be learnt by approaching this passage with a Eucharistic disposition, or with a salvific perspective, or from an experiential understanding. Another concern relates to how atonement theology, ways of understanding Scripture, and approaches to mission benefit from these chapters, while a third issue is regarding what ways a church's faith statement expresses incarnational and Trinitarian beliefs.

Given some understanding of the author's 'who-why' perspective, in what ways does John 13 to 17 inform our understanding of the 'what, where and when' of Christian *ecclesial* life, and of the ways in which leadership can be rich and empowering? In what ways do these insights inform us about 'how' things worked out for Jesus, for his followers, for the Jews and the Romans, and then for those who later read this Gospel?

Some historical and theological considerations

Textual evidence about the social context of the community for which the Gospel was written usually affirms a dating of John's Gospel towards the end of the first

century, and a likely Ephesian setting. Several factors may be significant if, as this implies, the Gospel is written after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and in a season when Synagogues were being re-defined in ways that affirmed traditional Jewish beliefs. The emerging Christian communities may have been increasingly dislocated from Jewish connections, as well as becoming more isolated from the Greco-Roman world in which they lived. Their faith identity would be impacted by and on their narrative about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, and how it contrasted with the local religious traditions.

One issue in John's Gospel is the criticism of the Jewish leadership and the negative portrayal of the Roman occupiers. There are many references to the Jewish leadership, as the term 'Jews' usually implies, and these leaders are not described as supporters of Jesus' ministry! A second factor is about the use of the Greek term *aposynagogos* in John's Gospel. Being 'put out of the Synagogue' may be a term that was not in significant use at the time of Jesus, but one mainly related to the later re-affirmation of Jewish beliefs (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2). John's Gospel indicates Jesus taught in Synagogues (John 6:59, 18:20), but warned about being expelled from them. Evidence relating to this practice occurring may come from the Birkat Ha-Minim.⁹⁹

Jesus' descriptions of his 'going away' (John 14:28) become significant markers in contextualising his death not as defeat but as a vital and essential event. Establishing and growing new communities of believers not only within Jewish contexts but beyond them required some form of interpretation of the Jesus story. Being *aposynagogos* is linked by the Gospel writer with belief in and confession of Jesus as Messiah, and with authentic worship (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2). Believers' confessions may cost them their lives, just as Jesus' witness to his Father, the Holy Spirit and himself led to his own death. Jesus' efforts in preventing his followers from 'stumbling' (John 16:1) relate to his return to his Father, whom he said his opponents did not know, just as they did not know him (John 16:3). The arrival of *Parakletos* (John 16:7) was essential to their survival as a fledgling Messianic community. Jesus would send the Holy Spirit, presumably with the approval and authority of the Father. His 'going away' (John 14:28) was vital in securing this outcome.

A look at textual references

John 13 to 17 contains references to Jesus' departure. The section begins with a formal statement of purpose, indicating that what followed could be understood in this context. The time had come for an intentional journey. Jesus would 'go to the Father' having completed his mission of love (cf. John 3:16, John 17:26).

⁹⁹ 'Birkat Ha-Minim ('benediction concerning heretics'), 'beseech[es] the redemption of the people of Israel'. *Birkat Ha-Minim*, (Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0003_0_02999.html).

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Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

Jesus told his disciples that they could not come with him at that time, but would come later (John 13:31–37). It is easy to connect this with the writer's earlier comment that these conversations took place 'before the festival of the Passover' (John 13:1). This link is especially significant given the reference to the glorification of the Son of Man and Peter's apparent willingness to die for his Leader.

'Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come"' (John 13:33).

Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus answered, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward' (John 13:36).

Another theme emerges in the next section where Jesus indicates that he needs to go so he can prepare a place in his 'Father's house' for them (John 14:1ff). Access to this residence required not only Jesus' departure, but his return. He would 'come again' and take them there himself. He provides the pathway, the truth and the life for this journey; a journey necessary for the revelation of the Father to those who travel with him. This passage relates to the introduction in John 13:1 where the writer spoke of Jesus being on a journey to the Father, one connected with his love for his followers.

After further explanations about his relationship with the Father, Jesus asks the disciples to believe 'that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves' (John 14:11). This invitation is a segue into Jesus explaining several consequences of his departure.

Firstly, they are to do 'greater works' than Jesus had done. These works would be in his name, 'so that the Father may be glorified in the Son' (John 14:13). Jesus does not describe what the works might be, but clearly indicates what results flow from them.

'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father' (John 14:12).

Following this statement Jesus expands on these themes, before commenting that his journey to the Father relates to the Father being greater than himself. By contrast, 'the ruler of the world' has 'no power' over him. It seems reasonable to conclude that everything in the discourse to this point comes together 'so that the world may know that I love the Father' (John 14:28–31). This understanding is

reinforced by the immediate reference to the disciples believing he was going to the Father, and doing so in the context of significant spiritual conflict. Either the church is without any spiritual relationship with God until some future *eschaton*, or all that Jesus has explained has ongoing relevance to the church while history continues.

‘You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I’ (John 14:28).

Secondly, chapter 14 explores Jesus’ journey to the Father’s house and presence by firstly identifying it with the Passover and ‘the end’ (John 13:1), no doubt referring to his suffering and death. The chapter is then dominated by considering Jesus’ relationship with his Father, and the participation of his followers in that relationship. The disciples’ inclusion would come about in the context of great conflict and suffering, but Jesus would ‘come again’ (John 14:3). His coming develops this familial theme, with Jesus assuring them that he would ‘not leave [them] orphaned’ (John 14:18).

The third key thought is embraced by Jesus’ reference to greater works, and to his followers’ inclusion in the life of the Father and himself. The permanent gift of the presence of the *Parakletos* is linked with these works and the disciples’ identity in the family of God. If *Parakletos* means helper or assistant, along with encourager and comforter, then greater works can be understood as accomplishments in an arena of conflict, just as life in the Father’s family also must deal with the ‘ruler of this world’ (John 14:30).

There is therefore a three-fold perspective in chapter 14. Victory over evil and death in and after conflict; the dynamic reality of a secure life as the Father’s family, in his Son, and in the Father’s house while this battle rages, and afterwards; and the permanent presence of *Parakletos* through and in whom they would experience Jesus’ return.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

1 John 4

In 1 John 4 we read of God as Father, Son and Spirit. Verse 13 speaks of the gift of God's Spirit as the way we 'know that we abide in [God] and he in us' (cf. 1 John 3:24, 5:6). The passage refers to the Spirit and the Father, and not just God and Jesus.

Verses 9 and 10 say the incarnation and the atonement are bases for knowing God's love, and so for knowing God as love. The incarnation reveals God's love, with the goal of authentic human living. The sacrificial action of Jesus addresses God's disapproval and rejection of anything not aligned with God's own Trinitarian being.

Using the language of 1 John regarding abiding and perfection (reaching a goal) anticipates an outcome in our lives, our churches and our communities. It results from God's love in and through us as we abide in him. Verse 14 speaks of testifying to the Father and the Son, and so to their saving action. Verse 13 indicates that this testimony is by the Spirit. Verses 19 and 20 describe something of what happens when 'We love because he first loved us'. These verses inform our understanding of God as Father, Son and Spirit, and how we can better relate to God and other people. Their message is relational, and one that it is foundational to any understanding of the Trinity.

God's being and relations

From an anthropological perspective, divine attributes may be seen as qualities or essences attributed by people to a divine being. From a theological viewpoint, these attributes describe revelations of God evident in creation, humanity and Scripture. Christological perspectives and our understanding of the historical Jesus inform our knowledge of God.

Our transience is an indication of our oneness with creation. Our vocational life and sabbath rest-refreshment in community expresses and explores our creational responsibilities and opportunities. The biblical narrative with its God-initiated covenants informs us as we anticipate God's *telos* by being who we are and by how we choose to live.

Christ is Word become flesh in the fullness of the Spirit. It is in, through and for him that everything was created and is ultimately fully restored. God's attributes are reflected by humanity. We are renewed by and for this glory as he restores us to be like him as his children (cf. 1 John 3:1–3). The Father, Son and Spirit tell us about their being and relationships as they express their goodness, love, truth, righteousness and holiness. The Son and Spirit exercise divine authority in sovereign and providential ways, as well as the Father. The Father, Son and Spirit

always act for us, and the Father, Son and Spirit are always with us in different ways.

The distinctions between the Father, Son and Spirit are not in this sense attributes. The Father is Father by being the Son's Father, with the Son being Son by being the Father's Son. Similarly, the Father and the Son are who they are in relation to the Spirit. The incarnation and Pentecost reveal the different ways the tri-personal one-God acts in history with us, for us, to us and by us in reconciling all things to God through the atonement. The Son and the Spirit work together in history testifying to the Father in this revelation and enabling us to participate in the divine nature as reconciled humanity (cf. 2 Peter 1:3, 4).

Jesus is declared to be God's Son, so revealing God as Father. He is Word become flesh and Wisdom from and of God. He is the way to the Father, the truth of the Father and the life of the Father, in the Spirit's fullness. He is the one in, through, and for whom everything was created. He does not leave us as orphans but breaks evil's grip on us, restores us and brings us home to his Father.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and the Father, by whom we are reborn and become God's family. The people of God, the church, the Father's family, are the body of Christ because God's Spirit is with us. It is through him that God reveals to us what he 'has prepared for those who love him' (1 Corinthians 2:9). It is the Spirit of God who intercedes for us and whose first fruits herald in us the liberation of creation 'from its bondage to decay [in order to] obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21).

Trinitarian thinking talks about God as *one being or essence* with *two processions* (one, the eternal generation of the Son, which connects with incarnation; the other being the 'spiration' or breathing of the Spirit), *three persons* (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), *four subsistent relations* (paternity and active spiration indicating origination, with filiation and passive spiration indicating procession: active spiration is not a new person as Father and Son spirate together) and *five properties* (meaning the names of what is proper to each person). These properties are that the Father is unoriginated and generative, the Son is generated, the Father and the Son are breathing, and the Spirit is breathed, so adding a property (unorigination) which is not a relation. The inter-related reciprocal loving interconnectedness or interpenetration has been described as *circumincessio* or *perichoresis*. This more technical description is but a glimpse of the indescribable magnificence of God, and of his great and glorious goodness and love.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ cf. Gerald O'Collins, *Tripersonal God, The* (Mahwah, New Jersey, USA: Paulist Press, 1999); Robert Letham, *Holy Trinity, The* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, USA: P&R Publishing, 2004); Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017); Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son & Holy Spirit* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2003); *Promise of Trinitarian Theology, The* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1993); Gilles Emery, *Trinity, The: An Introduction to Catholic*

Living in a faith-hope-love-truth journey

Conversion as a faith-hope-love-truth journey

- Discovering something of the already present Presence of the God (cf. Acts 17) who is ever present to us by God's Spirit, and who in his ongoing engagement with our personal history reveals God as Father and God as Son in and through the life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ, who in turn, reveal this Presence as the Spirit of the Living God.
- Discovering something of the Word who is Jesus Christ, incarnate Son of God, Word become flesh, and now ascended to his Father, and who reveals the Father and sends the promised Spirit, who in turn shows us the Father and the Son.
- In discovering Word-Narrative and Spirit-Presence we are taken to, and into, the Scriptures as the inspired record of the Hebrew and early Christian communities, including of the life of Jesus Christ. Central to, and unifying of the Scriptures, is God (as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who initiated redemption, recovery, restoration and renewal, focused, for Christians, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit.

Continuing in a faith-hope-love-truth journey

- Knowing God's goodness, love, truth, righteousness and holiness.
- Knowing these flow in grace and mercy bringing forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and the ultimate glory of life as God's family.
- Understanding something of God's persons and what is appropriate and proper for each divine person in relation to each other and to humanity.
- Seeing creation, including humanity, as ontologically reflective of God's unity, attributes and persons.
- Learning of incarnation as leading to atonement in all its diversity and richness as the central theme of history – not merely as example or pattern, or even potential, but as reality in us through participation as per Romans 8, Galatians 4, Titus 3, 2 Peter 1, etc.

Conversations about this faith-hope-love-truth journey

- Sharing ways in which the Holy Spirit is already present wherever we find ourselves going, revealing Christ as the Living Word, and so calling us to open our eyes to see what God is doing. This will include relating to the people we encounter with integrity and truth, treating them with dignity

Doctrine on the Triune God (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011); Ruben Angelici and Richard of Saint Victor, *Richard of Saint Victor on the Trinity*, trans. Ruben Angelici (Eugene, Oregon, USA: Cascade Books, 2011); Anne Hunt, *Trinity, The: Insights from the Mystics* (Collegeville, Minnesota, USA: ATF Press, 2010).

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and decency, and without discrimination and denigration, while not ignoring our own short-comings, or the powers involved in the demonic, in the mystery of lawlessness.

- Growing in confidence that the Spirit is teaching the language of the Word who is Christ whom the Scriptures reveal, and seeking opportunities for this Word to reveal himself, and for his Scripture to be understood.
- Experiencing the Spirit as the Spirit of the community of God and his people, and wanting to belong and grow and mature together.

Connections about this faith-hope-love-truth journey

- Maturing by growing in understanding about theologies of Trinity, incarnation and atonement.
- Appreciating the presence of God by participating in worship and sacrament, and by being at home in creation.
- Exploring biblical themes without creating false understandings and divisions between the divine attributes, the Father, Son and Spirit, or the action of God in time and space.

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 somewhat 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 possibly reconcile our differences. I hope readers with non-theistic and/or secular understandings can find some helpful common values, even though I have used what might seem to be merely a discussion of literary narratives, symbols and imaginations. Those with other religious belief systems may find fresh insights by sharing in my journey of faith-seeking-understanding, including where collisions of thought and practice emerge. To all readers, please forgive my short-comings and my inevitable and unhelpful biases, and may your reading bring you peace, joy and hope.

In this series

Living in Love and Freedom

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In Triune Community

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Meditations on Resilience and Renewal: Volumes 1 and 2

Living Love

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Redefining

On Earth as in Heaven

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The first two parts of this book developed from preparation for a small group during 2015 and 2016. The third section comprises background sermon notes written between 2012 to 2016, while the last part includes thoughts on different topics from along the way. I am very grateful for the leaders who provided the opportunities that motivated me to reflect on these themes.

The final note to *Living Together in Love* explains one way in which I came to appreciate something of what is shared in that section. I have considerable debt to the authors mentioned there, and to others listed in the *Reading Lists*, who, even though I have met few in person, have become valued companions.

My interest in Revelation was encouraged by my maternal grandfather who, in his last years took to reading Josephus and other first century authors. He was a reader of books on eschatology, including Henry Grattan Guinness's *The Approaching End of the Age: Viewed in the Light of History, Prophecy and Science*, which he passed onto me.¹⁰¹ Guinness's approach, and that of various books on the second coming of Jesus which were popular in the early 1970s, raised many questions for me. The perspectives adopted in these books were different to the commentaries and church histories that I have accessed since then, and found to be much more helpful.

I am very thankful for my family, including my parents and parents-in-law, and our daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren, for their rich insights into life and faith. The encouragement, kindness and generosity of Bev, my wife, have led me to a much deeper awareness of God and his mercy and grace.

¹⁰¹ H. Grattan Guinness, *Approaching End of the Age, The* (Paternoster Row, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880).

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What does it mean to receive a message *“from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth ... who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood”*?

Or to hear this One say that *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth”*?

Or for joy to be known by considering *“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy ... ”*?

Living in Love and Freedom considers questions such as these by exploring a number of biblical and theological themes, and by surveying several New Testament books.

This resource provides opportunities for personal reflection and group conversations. It encourages worship and meditation, and enriches application to everyday life.

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